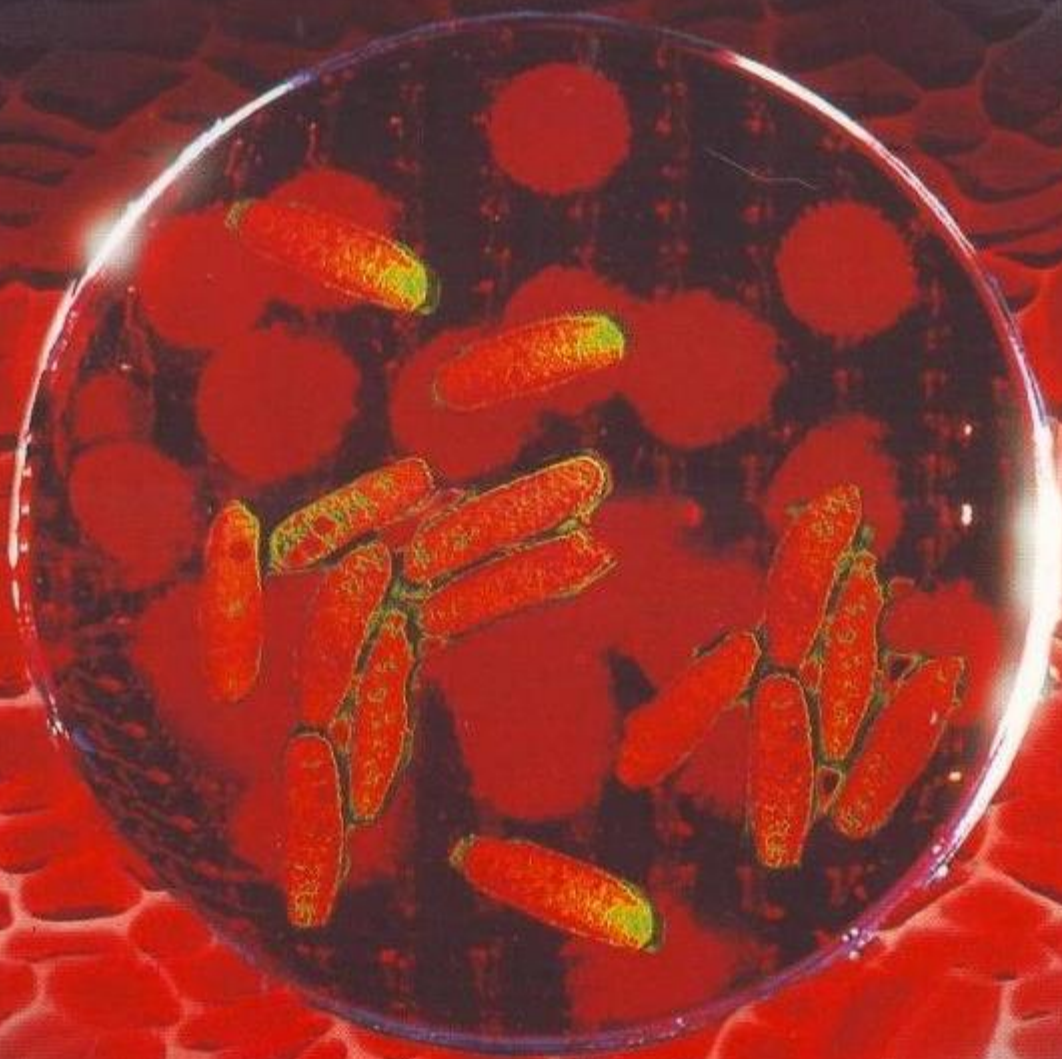


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...a body will remain in motion until
another force acts upon it.

A QUICK NOTE ON CROSS-SPECIES TRANSLATION CONVENTIONS

In *Alien Bodies*, the word “man” is used to describe any male sentient life-form, and the word “woman” is used to describe any female sentient life-form, even when the life-forms in question aren’t technically human. This may not be strictly accurate, but it does get rid of awkward sentences like “the male multi-armed semi-humanoid Kelzonian fish-person shook his head”.

Similarly, the word “humanoid” is used to describe any life-form that resembles a human being, even when a non-human is speaking; a Time Lord would actually describe someone as “looking Gallifreyan” instead of “looking humanoid”, but this looks clumsy and slightly embarrassing on paper.

Anyone requiring further information about cross-species translation conventions should consult Preface III of Professor Thripsted’s excellent *Genetic Politics Beyond the Third Zone*. Ask your local library if they can order you a copy. But only if you enjoy wasting people’s time.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Prologue: Last Rites | 1 |
| 1 Dramatis Personae | 4 |
| Homunculette's Story | 13 |
| 2 Strange Men and Their Companions | 18 |
| 3 Loathing the Alien | 27 |
| UNISYC'S Story | 35 |
| 4 Death, Death, and – Good Grief – More Death | 40 |
| 5 The Continuity Bomb | 49 |
| The Faction's Story | 57 |
| 6 The Bodysnatchers (Reprise) | 62 |
| 7 Surprised? | 71 |
| Mr Qixotl's Story | 80 |
| 8 The Body Politic | 85 |
| 9 Enfant Terrible | 93 |
| E-Kobalt's Story | 101 |
| 10 What <i>is</i> an Identity Crisis, Anyway? | 106 |
| 11 Mind Mush | 115 |
| The Shift's Story | 124 |
| 12 Shiftwork | 129 |
| 13 A-Les-son-in-An-a-to-my | 138 |
| The Dead Man's Story | 147 |
| 14 Final Offer | 152 |
| Epilogue: Last Rites | 161 |

LAST RITES

[THE PAST]

The Doctor had said he'd wanted to conduct a funeral. Well, whatever made him happy.

He'd been standing at the console for over an hour now, never moving from the spot, never looking up from the controls, never even bothering to check the scanner. Occasionally, the TARDIS would dematerialise, but the trips would be short and the ship would groan its way back into reality after a second or two. Every now and then, Sarah would wander into the console room to see how things were going, although there was never anything worth looking at on the screen. Far-away star clusters, and the spaces where star clusters couldn't be bothered forming. Eventually, after a hundred or so short hops, something interesting finally appeared.

"Interesting" being a relative term, mind you. It was a silver smear, hanging in the vacuum of nowhere-in-particular; not a planet, not an asteroid, not even a sinister abandoned space-station. Just a smear.

'What, is that it?' Sarah grumped.

The Doctor didn't reply. He looked up, at last, a frown of concern blooming among the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth. Still wearing his "grim" expression, Sarah noted. Actually, the Doctor's face had a kind of built-in grimness about it. A nose that wasn't so much hawk-like as vulture-ish, a forehead that someone had carved worry lines into with a Swiss Army knife... sometimes, his features almost looked as if they'd been sculpted out of marble, and that white hair of his – which never seemed to get ruffled, no matter how many ventilator shafts he crawled through – didn't make him look any more human.

'Oh,' Sarah mumbled. 'Sorry. Forgot. A funeral. Sombre atmosphere from now on. Promise.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, quite gently, and his hand performed a fifteen-second ballet across the console. The central column shifted an inch or so, the scanner flickering as the TARDIS moved closer to the smear. It was a metal tube, that much was clear now, evidently a relic from the days when sticking antennae all over spacecraft was considered to be a really smart idea and you could still use the word "rocket" without anyone sniggering.

Sarah tried to look interested. 'What is it?' she asked.

'A tomb,' said the Doctor. He couldn't resist a touch of the theatrical, God bless him. 'It's been floating freely for some time now. That's why it took the TARDIS so long to find it, you see? No fixed co-ordinates. Won't be long before it gets pulled back into Earth's gravity and... *fsht*.' He demonstrated the concept of atmospheric burn-up by making an elaborate gesture with three of his fingers.

Sarah clacked her tongue. 'All right. You said you wanted a funeral. Any explanations, or should I just go off in a sulk again?'

The Doctor smiled, but only weakly. 'There's a body inside that capsule, Sarah-Jane. The body of a traveller. A great traveller, you might say. This is something I've been meaning to do since the early days, but it's only now I've put the new dematerialisation circuit in that the TARDIS can steer herself properly...'

Sarah had the horrible feeling she was about to be kidnapped and led blindfold into Technogubbins City. 'So why would anyone want to put a corpse into orbit? Bit grizzly, isn't it?'

'Oh, the occupant was alive when the capsule was launched. Alive and kicking.'

'What went wrong?'

'Nothing went wrong. It was a one-way trip, that's all.'

The column shifted again, and something began to materialise on the floor of the console room, a few feet from where Sarah was standing. The object was roughly the same shape as a shuttlecock, a couple of yards from tip to tail. No, not a shuttlecock; more like one of those ice-creams you used to get in the '60s, the ones that came in plastic cones with balls of bubblegum at the bottom. The shape was smooth and metallic, with rust-coloured letters stencilled across its surface. The words weren't in English, and the Rs were the wrong way round.

It was the silver thing, Sarah realised. Or at least, the capsule that had been attached to the end of the silver thing. The TARDIS had neatly materialised around it. Sarah had no idea where the rest of the tube might have gone, but she doubted it was worth asking.

The Doctor knelt down, with a small sigh of effort, then slipped his sonic whist out of a crushed velvet pocket and got to work on the capsule's rivets. A minute later, the wide end of the object fell away. The scent of old leather and electrified air wafted out of the space inside, but there were none of the smells Sarah would have associated with death, no hint of decay or decomposition. Trying not to feel like a spectator at a traffic accident, she squatted down next to the Doctor and peered into the opening.

There was hardly any room in there, almost no space for supplies, barely enough even for the tangled mass of metal and rubber that was presumably the rudimentary life-support system. Just as Sarah was reaching the conclusion that no normal human being could possibly have squeezed into the thing, her eyes focused on the corpse. It was stiff and it was pale, its body clamped to a throne of leather and plastic, a look of exhaustion smeared across its face.

It was the corpse of something that had died struggling.

It was the corpse of a small dog.

Sarah remained silent as they crossed the surface of Quiescia, not being able to think of anything remotely worthwhile to say. The Doctor more or less ignored her, and concentrated on dragging the wooden casket behind him. The bottom of the box made nasty crunching sounds against the blue pebbles, but the atmosphere seemed to soak up the noise, turning it into nothing more than a muffled scratching. Even the air here has tact, Sarah reflected.

They stopped at the top of a low hill, where the stones beneath their feet were tinted violet by a sun that was either slowly setting or slowly rising. The sun was huge and red, but seemed to give off very little heat. Sarah pulled her hands into the sleeves of her jumper, while the Doctor began sifting through the rocks on the hilltop around them. Quiescia was nothing but rocks, apparently. As far as the eye could see, everything was blue and jagged, a landscape of cerulean plateaus and lumpy turquoise mountains.

Eventually, the Doctor found a rock that was roughly the same size as a tombstone, and began burning letters into its surface with his screwdriver thingummy. Without waiting for instructions, Sarah started digging, pushing the pebbles and the cobalt-coloured earth aside until she'd made a hole big enough for the casket. Once his work had been completed, the Doctor balanced the tombstone at the head of the grave.

He'd carved the name LAIKA into the rock in block capitals, without dates or descriptions. The Doctor tugged the casket towards the hole, momentarily catching Sarah's eye and giving her a fleeting smile (of gratitude, she supposed) before the box slid into its final resting place.

'The first traveller ever to leave the Earth,' he said, as he stood before the grave. His voice was tired and fragile, little more than a whisper. '1957. The Sputnik Two experiment. Sent out into the dark places without any way of getting home again. Alone and abandoned.'

Sarah lowered her eyes. She wasn't sure why.

'Why do I care?' she heard the Doctor mutter.

He scooped up a handful of blue dirt, and let it slip through his fingers onto the lid of the casket. After that, there was silence. There were no native life-forms on Quiescia, Sarah noted, no predators or scavengers or any of nature's other little graverobbers, despite the breathable atmosphere. And come to think of it, where was the air coming from, if there weren't any trees? Briefly, she wondered if this whole world had been set up by the Doctor, put here purely for the purposes of the burial.

'This is the furthest system in Earth's galaxy,' the Doctor explained, gently. Sarah wondered if he was addressing her, or the occupant of the coffin. 'As far out as you can wander. As good a place to rest as any. Yes. As good a place as any.'

Sarah said nothing. They stood by the grave for a few minutes more before heading back to the TARDIS.

'Well?' Sarah asked.

On the scanner, a purple-veined planet basked in the light of its sun. Quiescia, Sarah realised,

seen from the quiet side of the ionosphere. The capsule had already vanished from the floor of console room.

'Sent back into space,' the Doctor told her, his attention fixed on the console again. '"Things come from the void, and return to the void."'

'You know the answer really, don't you?'

The Doctor looked up at her, furrowing his brow.

'On the planet,' Sarah elaborated. 'You asked why you cared. Oh, come on. You know why you care. I know *I* do.'

He paused for a moment, as if wondering whether to take her seriously or not. 'Do you?' he asked.

Sarah nodded. 'You buried Laika,' she said. 'But...'

Then the TARDIS folded itself out of existence, and the sentence was finished in an entirely different galaxy.

A hundred million nights passed on Quiescia. Nothing changed, and no one else came.

1

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

East Indies ReVit Zone, 15:06 (Local Time)

There were things in Lieutenant Bregman's hair, and she was pretty sure they were trying to make nests in her scalp. The bugs were the worst thing. The heat, she could deal with, even if her shirt now showed sweat stains where she didn't even know she had glands. The dirt, she could deal with, even if the treetops kept dribbling toucan-guana onto her shoulders and her trousers were covered in several exciting new varieties of animal excrement. The tedium, she could deal with, even if she'd been walking through the rainforest for so long that she was starting to see hidden messages in the bark.

She tugged at her hair, pulling out a few black strands stuck together with four-day-old hair-spray, and felt the insects squirming between her fingertips. They started biting their way into her hand, so she went "ugh" and tossed them into the undergrowth.

Six metres up ahead, Colonel Kortez stopped, turned, and looked back at her.

'Insects,' she said. 'Sir.'

The Colonel nodded. His face reminded Bregman of one of the stone heads on Easter Island, a near-rectangular block of skull with a frown that looked like it had been chiselled into place. Bregman saw his eyes start to glaze over again. 'Insects,' he agreed. 'The insects aren't what they seem. Be alert, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, Sir. I will, Sir.'

So far on this expedition, the Colonel had named over fifty different things that were "not what they seemed", from the natives they'd met at the last village outpost to the small mammals nesting in the forest canopy. Kortez had been in UNISYC for over thirty years, according to his ident sheet; he'd been part of the ISC division during the Cyberbreaches in the '30s, he'd been at Saskatoon when the Republicans had issued their ultimatum against Canada. If the rumours at UNISYC Central were true, he'd also been shot at by prehistoric lemur-people and survived an assassination attempt by an android assassin posing as the Norwegian Minister for Health.

The human brain, Bregman reflected sagely, is not designed to deal with that kind of thing. She briefly wondered if she'd end up like him one day, another victim of Displacer Syndrome, two steps away from a padded cell and seeing robot assassins peeking out from behind the bushes.

Kathleen Bregman had been part of UNISYC for nine of her twenty-seven years, and – with the exception of the pickled exhibits in the Little Green Museum – had never seen an extraterrestrial. She was quite happy to keep it that way, as well. God knew, they were bad enough when they were stuffed and dipped in formaldehyde.

Suddenly, the bugs were back in force, sticking hot pins into her scalp. They were sucking her blood, Bregman was sure of it, and she felt skinny enough already without any more of her body mass being taken away. At the last outpost, she'd tried to buy some insect repellent from the village medicine man, but he'd ended up selling her a box of aspirin he'd insisted had been made from the roots of local mystic herbs, despite the fact that the packet had been marked with the name of a leading multinational drugs company and a sell-by date of 23/4/2064.

'What for you go into great dark-heart forest?' the medicine man had asked, pretending he couldn't speak proper English just in case they turned out to be tourists.

Colonel Kortez had puffed out his chest, so the man could see the insignia on his shirt pocket. 'We're searching for the places of the ancients,' he'd intoned, like it had been some kind of holy mission. 'We're looking for the Unthinkable City.'

Amazingly, the medicine man had kept a straight face. 'You go to next longhouse,' he'd said. 'See Kamala the Shop. He know. He know all about secret of City.'

Kamala had turned out to be a wrinkled, dry-roasted native who ran a souvenir shop, its main line being t-shirts bearing the legend I SAW THE UNTHINKABLE CITY AND LIVED!, plus maps

showing where the best UFOs could be sighted. Bregman had wondered how he managed to stay in business. She and the Colonel were the only foreigners she'd seen around the village, and the island hardly had the facilities for tourism these days, not since the interior had been re-carpeted with forest.

Still, maybe it was the off-season for UFOs.

Kamala had actually succeeded in selling the Colonel a bumper sticker, which he'd insisted was really a lucky talisman in disguise. It was highly unlikely, he'd said, that they'd find the Unthinkable City without it. KorteZ had nodded and said that the bumper sticker was not what it seemed. Of course, even with the sticker, Kamala hadn't been able to promise them they'd find what they were looking for. Once the merchandise had been paid for, he'd pointed out that the City had only been sighted four or five times in the twenty years since the island had been turned into a ReVit Zone, even though the entire forest had been meticulously surveyed and v-mapped. Kamala had proudly pointed out that it was therefore the last true "lost city" on the face of the Earth.

The last thing Bregman had noticed before leaving the shop had been the message on Kamala's own t-shirt, which he'd worn over a traditional native polyester loincloth.

SO, THIS MUST BE THE HUMAN DELEGATION, it had read. Bregman hadn't understood that at all. Probably a native in-joke.

She saw KorteZ had stopped moving, and was staring up at the office-grey patches of sky just visible between the treetops. No sunshine here, thought Bregman, not these days. Still damn hot, though.

'Here,' KorteZ proclaimed.

She blinked the sweat out of her eyes. 'Sir?'

'Here. Here. This is the place.' He extended an arm in her general direction, a thick pink branch 50 per cent fat and 50 per cent muscle. 'The card, Lieutenant?'

Bregman reached into her top pocket, and slipped the card out of its protective envelope. The card was a brilliant metallic silver, its surface reflecting sharp white light into her eyes despite the obvious absence of sun. 'Sir? I, erm... I thought we were looking for the City, Sir.'

KorteZ nodded. 'Did you ever see *Brigadoon*, Lieutenant?'

'Er, no. No, Sir.'

'Beautiful film. Beautiful. All those wonderful old songs. Do you know why they don't write songs like that any more, Lieutenant?'

Oh God, his eyes were going all glassy again. 'No, Sir. No idea.'

KorteZ shook his head, sadly. 'No. Neither have I. Neither have I.' He fell silent.

'Erm... Sir...?'

'Brigadoon. It was a village. In Scotland. You remember Scotland? No. You were born after the Unification. I remember. This village... this Brigadoon... it became *misplaced*.'

Bregman was having trouble working out whether he was talking about real life or the film, now. 'In what way, Sir?'

KorteZ shot her a suspicious glance, as if the answer were obvious, and by asking she'd revealed herself to be an evil enemy spy-clone. 'It was going to be attacked by witches,' he said. 'So it was removed. Brilliant tactic, I always thought. The local people made a deal. With God. So that Brigadoon would vanish from the Earth, and only reappear again once every hundred years. Can you imagine that, Lieutenant? A place that only exists once in every century. And then only for one day.'

Bregman nodded. She kept nodding until she was sure he wasn't going to add anything else without a prompt. 'Is this relevant, Sir?'

'Of course it's relevant,' the Colonel snapped. 'Why would I mention it if it weren't relevant? Here. Here is where we enter the Unthinkable City.'

'Oh. What Unthinkable City would that be, Sir?'

KorteZ gave her another one of his looks. 'Get a grip on yourself, Lieutenant,' he said, and pointed.

Bregman followed his finger, only to find herself staring at a gigantic stone cube, a solid off-white block set into the ground a couple of paces to her left. So near, in fact, that there was no way she should have been able to get this close to it without noticing, unless it had spontaneously appeared out of thin air or...

No. That way lies madness, Bregman told herself, or Displacer Syndrome at the very least. The block was eight metres along each side, primitive pictograms of tiny bubbleheaded Von Daniken spacemen scratched into its surface from top to bottom. Bregman stepped back, and saw there was another cube next to it, and another next to that, and another next to that, and...

'Oh God,' she croaked. 'Oh, *God*.'

Geneva Neutral Province, 19:29 (Eurotime)

The Doctor folded his hands, narrowed his eyes, furrowed his brow, leaned back in his chair, unfolded his hands, frowned, smiled, cocked his head, drummed his fingers on the desktop, opened his mouth to ask a question, thought better of it, closed his mouth, frowned again, scratched the back of his head, and went "mmmm".

'Remind me,' he finally said. 'How does the horsey thing move?'

Across the board, General Tchike lit up another cigarette. 'The *knight*, Doctor, moves two squares forward and one to the side. Your move.'

'Two forward and one to the side? Is that it?'

'That's it,' grumbled Tchike, coughing the words out of his gut, the way only a pure-blood eastern European could.

'It can't move along its own existential timeline?'

The General shook his head, his jowls quivering behind the nicotine clouds. 'Doctor, we agreed. Only the bishops are time-active. The rooks have minimal hyperspatial capability, and the queen can make bargains with the Higher Powers of Creation to move around corners. The knights go two forward and one to the side. Still your move.'

The Doctor nodded, his curls bouncing up and down just above his eyeline. Quite distracting, that. One of this body's more obvious design flaws. 'So simple, and yet so... we couldn't play something a little more complicated, could we? I'm sorry, I'm finding it a bit hard to concentrate at the moment.'

The General rumbled the rudest word in the Russian language. 'We agreed. Each time we play, the rules become only a little more complex. Your idea, Doctor. You said we would understand each other better if we created the rules together.'

The Doctor sighed. Extravagantly. 'It's this new neurosystem of mine. Ever since the change... my last life was so good at chess, it takes a while to remember...' He wiggled his fingers over the board for a few moments, teasing the expectant pieces, then finally grasped one of his knights and shunted it into the battlezone.

The General grunted, and reached out for a bishop. He lifted it into the palm of his hand, signifying that it was moving into another timeframe. 'You realise why I wanted to see you here?'

'We had an appointment to play, I thought.'

'Other than that.'

'Ah.' The Doctor thought about it for a moment. 'Well, I presume you're going to try to execute me.'

General Tchike dropped the bishop into the top drawer of his desk, and let a great plume of grey smoke out of his lungs.

'Perceptive,' he said.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Oh, you know. After a few hundred years of experience, you can tell when somebody wants to kill you. Call it instinct. My move?'

The General tapped some ash from the end of his cigarette onto the floor of his office. Probably just keeping the cleaners on their toes, the Doctor decided. The office was large, soulless, and expensive-looking, in that order; every available surface decorated with UNISYC insignia. The desk was the only major furnishing, leaving a vast expanse of plush carpet between the door and the tinted window (bulletproof, naturally) that took up the whole of the far wall. The desk was set in front of the glass, Tchike seated with his back to the Geneva skyline.

'You got in my way,' Tchike explained. 'Nothing personal, I know. You habitually get in people's way. It's in your job description. I understand.'

'Quite. And what do the pawns do?'

'They just go forwards. Listen to me, Doctor. The first time we met. Saskatoon. 2054. When

you were still wearing that other body of yours, the little baggy one. You remember?’

‘I remember!’ Even the Doctor was surprised at how excited he sounded. The memory had got lost somewhere in “the change”, and getting it back was like being given an unexpected present. ‘We fought the Montana Republican Militia together. They were using thermosystronic weapons they’d bought from the Selachians, they were going to try and take over Canada... whatever happened to all those thermosystron bombs?’

‘You blew them up.’

The Doctor scratched his ear. ‘Oh yes. That was it.’

‘I had direct orders from the inner circle of the World Zones Authority itself. Orders to capture the arsenal, not to neutralise it. I had a duty to bring those weapons in. A sworn duty, Doctor.’

‘I couldn’t allow that kind of technology to fall into the wrong hands, General. If it’s any consolation, I’m sure it didn’t hurt your career.’

‘I understand. As I said. But you got in my way. And honour demands I punish you for it.’ The General took an extra-long drag on the cigarette, then pushed himself out of his chair. ‘You hurt me, I hurt you. You see?’

‘Mmmm,’ said the Doctor.

The Unthinkable City, 15:31 (Local Time)

Mr Qixotl was short, frog-like, and genetically shabby. His suit was genuine Scintachi, acquired at great expense from the fashion-butchers of Vienna Prima, but he was surrounded by an aura of cheapness that always made his clothes look as though they were trying to slide off his body in disgust. Even his face seemed to have been designed for life in low society, its features knowing they’d never be attractive and settling for a kind of fish-eyed rumpledness instead.

He liked to tell himself he looked mature beyond his years. In truth, he looked more like a thirty-year-old who’d sold off the next fifty years of his life at bargain basement prices. Not really old, just lacking a future.

Now Mr Qixotl ambled along the inside of the City wall, hands stuffed into his trouser pockets, idly swearing at the toucans that cackled in the forest on the other side of the perimeter. Despite the fact that everything was going to plan, despite the fact that the first three delegations had managed to reach the City without doing any lasting damage to the structure of local space-time, and despite the fact that he’d so far managed to stop the rival representatives killing each other, Mr Qixotl was defiantly, categorically miserable. It was the climate, he decided. Heat or no heat, he was starting to sneeze, shiver, and cough up small yellow gobbets of mucus which had no right to be in his throat in the first place.

Glumly, he wiped his nose on the arm of his jacket. Then he remembered he was supposed to be upwardly mobile, and made a mental note to have nasal surgery at the nearest opportunity, or possibly to buy some handkerchiefs, whichever was easier.

Upwardly mobile. That was the thing to remember. This was the Big Time, capital B, capital T. No more skulking around seedy cocktail bars scraping narcotic residue out of the ashtrays, no more performing backstreet gene-splices for second-rate thugs who wanted to avoid DNA fingerprinting. If this whole shebang went off without a hitch... *when* this whole shebang went off without a hitch... he’d be off Hookey Street for life and into the stratosphere of the *nouveau cool*. You’re a respected trader in high-quality merchandise now, Mr Qixotl reminded himself, one of the new breed of up-and-up socioeconomic Rottweilers. Cheer up, for pity’s sake.

He surveyed the City as he walked, telling himself he was in complete control here, telling himself nothing happened inside the perimeter without his say-so. It wasn’t exactly true, but it made him feel better. The City had been built to impress his clients, put together in a day or so with an old block transfer modulator and some sticky-backed matter augmenters. There’d been a few teething troubles with the Brigadoon circuit, at first – the City had projected ghost-images of itself backwards and forwards in time on more than one occasion, though Mr Qixotl doubted anyone would have noticed – but overall, he was pretty pleased with the way the place had turned out.

Most of the buildings were just for show, natch. Hollow shells force-weathered to look like ancient ruins, covered in little pictograms Qixotl hoped looked suitably ethnic. In fact, the only fully furnished structure was the ziggurat, the great stepped pyramid at the dead centre of the

City enclosure. Yeah, “great” was a good word. Everything in the City had to look “great”. The same way the Seven Hundred Wonders of the Galaxy were supposed to be “great”. The same way the Wall of China was supposed to be “great”.

Eventually, he reached the nearest City gate, a colossal (yup, “colossal” was good, “colossal” was even better than “great”) megalithic arch set into the wall at the south-western edge of the enclosure. As expected, the ground by one of the gate-stones was damp. Trying not to get any closer than he absolutely had to, Mr Qixotl sniffed at the wet patch.

Leopard urine. Good. This was where the animals usually came to relieve themselves, but they weren’t exactly regular, and Qixotl hadn’t been sure whether any of the cat spoor would be fresh enough for him to use. He slid the decoder out of his jacket pocket, activating it with a flick of his thumb before dipping the business end into the puddle.

Mr Qixotl had put a lot of thought into the City’s security systems. At first, he’d considered using robotic surveillance devices, birds with security cameras in their heads, cybernetic animals with glowing red eyes, that kind of thing. But it had all seemed a bit *passé*, really. In the end, he’d decided on a little selective breeding instead. The island already had a primitive bio-induction system in place, installed two decades earlier by a local government with an obsessive environmental streak, so adding a few new biodata systems to the works hadn’t been a problem. As a result, the leopards he’d introduced to the ecosystem had rapidly evolved neural systems capable of translating sensory information into pix-pulses and encoding the data as hormonal traces. Or, to put it another way, everything the animals witnessed got turned into TV pictures and stored in their urine.

Mr Qixotl allowed himself a brief moment of smugness. Credit where it’s due, he thought. I haven’t lost my touch.

The decoder sorted through the recent memories of the leopard that had wet this particular patch, and fed the data to the two-inch pixscreen set into the machine’s handle. Mr Qixotl saw the rainforest through the animal’s eyes as it crept between the trees, the image blurring and jumping whenever the creature blinked or turned its head. Finally, two shapes became visible through the greenery. With another flick of his thumb, Mr Qixotl set the device to give him sound as well as visuals.

‘Did you ever see *Brigadoon*, Lieutenant?’

‘Er, no. No, Sir.’

‘Beautiful film. Beautiful. All those wonderful old songs. Do you know why they don’t write songs like that any more, Lieutenant?’

‘No, Sir. No idea.’

Mr Qixotl checked the decoder’s chronometer. That had happened twenty-six minutes ago, so...

He stood, shook the decoder, and slipped it back into his Scintachi jacket. Twenty-six minutes. By now, the UNISYC reps would have found an entrance and started exploring the City. Assuming, of course, they’d remembered their invite card. Qixotl headed back towards the ziggurat, determined to reach the building before his latest guests arrived.

If no one’s around to offer them drinks, he thought, they might start getting ugly. Humans are like that.

Geneva Neutral Province, 19:32 (Eurotime)

‘You know the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, of course?’ said the General.

‘Mmm. Which version of the story were you thinking of?’

‘The Eisenck Portfolio.’

‘Oh, the neutered version. Early twenty-first century.’ The Doctor cleared his throat, and made a great show of brushing some imaginary dust off his jacket lapels, though for no particular audience. The General had his back turned now, and was gazing out at the skyline on the other side of the window. ‘The Green Knight says he’ll let any man chop off his head, as long as he can come back the next day and chop off the head of his executioner. The knights fall over themselves to do it, because they don’t know the Green Knight can walk away from his decapitation with a smile on his face. He’s not quite human, you see. Sir Gawain is the one who gets to do the deed, so the next day, he has to offer his neck to the Green Knight. And he does. Just to keep the promise.’

'Not just because of the promise. You don't understand, do you, Doctor?'

The Doctor did his best to look confused. 'Don't I?'

'The soldier's directive. To continue the cycle of retribution, even in the face of death. Even when you know the consequences will kill you. Say what you like, about knowing Napoleon or meeting Haig or watching at Agincourt. Tell me your fairy stories. It makes no difference. You don't understand. You never have. You never will.'

'I see.' The General still had his back turned, and the sunset was painting shiny patches of orange on top of his fat, bald head. The Doctor took the opportunity to move one of Tchike's bishops to a more convenient square. Not cheating, he told himself. Making the game more complex. 'And are you thinking of having my head cut off, at all?'

The General paused. 'It's a possibility. I've read your medical reports. All the old idents from the UNIT days. I know regeneration can only do so much. Please put that bishop back where it was, Doctor. You remember Colonel Kortez? Sergeant Kortez, as he was nine years ago.'

'Yes. Serious-looking man, very square jaw. Talked about Zen Buddhism a lot. Rather confused, I thought. Still, maybe he wasn't what he seemed.'

'The Colonel is on a mission for me. In the East Indies ReVit Zone. Does that mean anything to you?'

'East Indies ReVit... Borneo. You mean Borneo.'

General Tchike turned back to the chessboard, a gargoyle's smile breaking out across his face. He thinks he's won some kind of victory over me, mused the Doctor, but he's still worried about showing his hand. He keeps skirting the issue, changing the subject. 'Tell me something,' Tchike said. 'Do you know why you're allowed to move so freely on this planet? Why your interference in our affairs is tolerated? Why Earth agrees to put up with you, the way it does?'

'Ah. Well, I wasn't aware Earth knew about me, much.'

Tchike narrowed his eyes. 'Not the commoners. The governments. The United Nations. The World Zones Authority. The ones who've spent the last three hundred years cleaning up your litter.'

'Oh, them.' The Doctor frowned. 'I'm sorry, I've forgotten the question.'

'I'll tell you why Earth puts up with you, Doctor. Because it thinks you're immortal. That one misguided belief is what keeps you alive. It's what stops our fingermen blowing your ugly changeling face off the second you step out of that police box of yours. You understand? Earth thinks you're immortal, and it's scared of the consequences if it tries to prove you're not. That's why the CIA didn't put a bullet through your throat in the 1970s, and that's why I didn't kill you myself at Saskatoon. All we ever needed was an assurance. One scrap of evidence you can bleed as well as the rest of us.'

The grin turned into a snarl. The Doctor tensed.

'And that isn't where the bishop was,' sneered the General.

The door of the office flew open. The Doctor was on his feet in a second, but the General's men were already swarming into the room. Dark uniforms, the Doctor noted, red UNISYC insignia on their shoulderpads. Black masks, like plastic executioners' hoods, visors pulled down over their eyes. The features of the Tactical Security Division.

Plasma rifles primed and ready. Naturally.

The men froze into position on the other side of the office, weapons targeted. Waiting for the firing order, the Doctor realised. He started to back away, edging around the desk towards the General.

'We now have our assurance,' Tchike growled. 'The rules have changed. You may consider yourself a valid target.'

'Would it change anything if I said I had absolutely no idea what you're talking about?'

'No.'

'Thought not.' The Doctor took a deep breath. 'No last requests, then? Time for one final white chocolate mouse? Sorry, I'm trying to give up on the jelly babies.'

He reached into his jacket. The men were prepared for such a move; evidently, the General had warned them about the terrible things that could emerge from his pockets. The nearest gunner fired once, a warning shot, the plasma burst burning the elbow off the Doctor's jacket and impacting against the bulletproofed window behind him with a satisfying *splud*.

The Doctor howled, clutching his arm as if mortally wounded, then fell backwards in a graceful, distracting, and somewhat over-elaborate spin. The General opened his mouth to give the firing order. The Doctor threw himself at the window, slamming his elbow against the exact spot where the plasma burst had weakened its cellular structure.

'Fire,' Tchike barked.

The glass cracked. The pane shattered. The Doctor dropped out of the office and tumbled towards the ground, forty-six storeys below.

The General calmly folded his hands behind his back before stepping towards the empty window-frame.

'Sir?' The leader of the Tactical Security unit shuffled up to him, and respectfully raised his visor. 'It's over forty storeys, Sir. When he hits the ground –'

'He won't hit the ground,' said Tchike.

'Sir...?'

'He won't hit the ground. He's the Doctor.' Tchike peered out of the office. There was no body on the pavement below, no spattering of blood at ground level, no sign of the Doctor at all. The security man coughed nervously.

'We, uh... we missed him, Sir,' he said.

'Yes. We missed him.' The General turned back to his desk.

'Sorry, Sir.'

Tchike waved the apology aside. 'There will be other opportunities. I thought this might be the time. Perhaps I should have known better.' He consulted the desktop organiser next to the chess-board. 'We're scheduled to play again on July 16th next year. You can have another shot at him then.'

'Sir... do you think he'll show up? I mean, after today –'

'He'll be there. He has to be there.' The General sat, somewhat wearily, the mock-leather chair sighing pitifully under his weight. 'Now I've had my chance to cut off his head, he'll want the chance to cut off mine.'

The Unthinkable City, 15:36 (Local Time)

'Can't you just answer the damned question?' demanded Mr Homunculette. 'Who, exactly, are you supposed to be representing?'

Mr Qixotl tried not to smirk. That, he thought, was as close to diplomacy as Homunculette ever got. The man acted as if he'd been on the edge of a nervous breakdown since birth, as if he were still waiting for a good excuse to have a full-blown psychotic fit. Homunculette's people had been involved in a particularly unpleasant war for some time now, and it had left them horribly neurotic. Qixotl had stopped in the stone passageway outside the anteroom, hoping to hear something interesting from the other side of the doorway, but all he'd heard so far was Homunculette's usual whining gargle.

Not that Mr Qixotl really had to eavesdrop. He had the whole ziggurat bugged anyway.

There was a brief silence from the anteroom.

'Confidentiality?' spat Homunculette. 'Don't talk to me about confidentiality. Let me tell you something, you're dealing with an agent of the most secretive and... are you listening to me?'

Mr Qixotl decided to step in before the man started ranting.

'Afternoon,' he said, brightly, pretending not to have heard any of the preceding conversation. 'Getting to know each other, are we? Lovely. There's some cheesy nibbles in the cocktail lounge, if you're interested.'

The chamber was small, and lit by flaming torches which, in Mr Qixotl's opinion, lent a lovely Gothic feel to the place. The anteroom was sandwiched between the passageway and the conference hall, the area unfurnished except for a table and a handful of oak-flavoured plastic chairs. Homunculette was sprawled across at least three of these, staring at the front page of the *New Bornean Gazette*. Mr Qixotl had only left the newspaper on the table to add a touch of local colour to the room, and he was frankly amazed anyone was bothering to read it. Homunculette still hadn't changed out of the black business suit he'd been wearing when he'd arrived, even though it

was spattered with mud and stained with something that looked disturbingly like organic waste. Evidently, thought Qixotl, he'd come straight here from the roughest boardroom meeting in history.

No one else was visible in the room, but that wasn't surprising. The other occupant, the one Mr H had been shouting at, wouldn't be seen or heard until it wanted to be.

'We were wondering how much longer we're going to have to wait,' hissed Homunculette, almost literally lying through his teeth. 'I mean, I wouldn't be so rude as to suggest we're getting impatient –'

'Perish the thought,' cut in Mr Qixotl.

'– but we're reaching the stage where we might be thinking about getting impatient, at some point in the near future. If you get my meaning.'

Mr Qixotl tried to look cheerful. 'Not getting edgy, I hope, Mr H. Saw your little friend up on the roof, on the way in. Still expecting trouble, are we?'

'Marie isn't my friend,' snapped Homunculette. 'She's my companion. There's a difference.' Then he stopped scowling, just for a moment, and looked generally anxious instead. 'On the roof? What was she doing on the roof?'

'She's your "companion", Mr H, not mine. Looked like she was keeping watch, to me.'

Homunculette relaxed. Visibly. That didn't happen often, in Mr Qixotl's experience. Homunculette's face looked as if it had been built for tension; it was long, it was narrow, and it was topped by a crop of thinning black hair that all the gel in Mutter's Spiral couldn't make stylish. 'Marie isn't happy about the security arrangements in this place,' he muttered. 'She's worried about an attack from the outside. You don't even have any atmospheric defences set up.'

Mr Qixotl smiled disarmingly. He hoped. 'Relax, Mr H. Only another three, er, parties to come before we can start proceedings, and one of them's only a couple of minutes away now. Listen, if you're getting itchy feet, why not go and have a chat with Mr Trask in his guestroom? Sure he'd be glad of the company.'

'Thank you, no,' spat Homunculette.

Mr Qixotl opened his mouth to say something facile and reassuring, but found himself suddenly distracted by the table. There was an unusual pattern in the wood grain, a pattern he'd never noticed there before. It looked almost like... letters?

THE HUMAN REPRESENTATIVES ARE COMING? spelt the table.

Mr Qixotl grimaced. 'Yeah. Yeah, that's right, Mr Shift. Why d'you ask?'

He stared at the table, but the words had faded away. His eyes wandered towards the newspaper.

I WAS EXPLORING THE FOREST EARLIER, read the front-page headline. I SAW THEM MAKING THEIR WAY HERE.

Mr Qixotl picked up the paper and started reading the lead story, which had until a few seconds ago been about a major scandal involving the President of Malta. 'Didn't see you, did they, Mr S?'

BARELY, read the newsprint. THE WOMAN MIGHT HAVE CAUGHT SIGHT OF ME AT THE VILLAGE, BUT I (CONTINUED ON PAGE THREE)

Mr Qixotl turned the page.

(FROM PAGE ONE) DOUBT SHE KNEW WHO I WAS. TELL ME SOMETHING, MR QIXOTL.

'Whatever you like, Mr S.' Mr Qixotl tried to maintain his smile. He hated talking to the Shift. He hated talking to any non-corporeal life-form. The Shift was the messenger of a power which enjoyed dealing in abstracts, for some reason. It was a purely conceptual entity, only existing as a set of ideas inside the head of whoever it wanted to communicate with. Right now, it was somewhere inside Mr Qixotl's neurosystem, altering his perceptions so he could see its little "messages" worked into the text of the *New Bornean Gazette*. He flipped through the rest of the paper, eventually stopping at the crossword.

1 ACROSS. Why exactly did you invite humans to this auction? My employers assumed that only representatives of time-active cultures would be here (8,6).

'That's what we thought, as well,' scowled Homunculette, evidently having read the same thing on the sports page.

Mr Qixotl sniffed. 'Yeah, well. They're from UNISYC, they've got their own reasons for wanting the property. That's why the auction's being held on Earth, so the human reps can get here

without busting a gut.'

3 DOWN. Speaking of the "property"... I've been looking over this City of yours. The Relic's in your vault, true? Two levels below ground level (5,2,4,2).

'There a problem with that, Mr Shift?'

17 ACROSS. No. I took the liberty of inspecting the security devices protecting it, though. Interesting. Maybe a little over-complicated. However... (3,4)

'The security had better be up to scratch, that's all,' Homunculette snapped, interrupting the crossword. If such a thing were possible. 'You know how many major powers are going to be after that Relic, don't you? The last thing we want is a bunch of Cybermen turning up on our doorstep.'

Mr Qixotl shook his head. 'Everything's sorted, Mr H. The City's got a Brigadoon circuit in effect, so you'd need some pretty smart technology just to get in here without an invite card. And the Cybermen aren't going to be coming back to Earth for another year or so, I checked. No one's going to gatecrash the auction. Trust me on this, all right?'

Homunculette made a muted grunting sound that might just have been a laugh.

'I'm a Time Lord,' he said. 'We don't trust anyone unless they're dead or stupid. We're like that.'

HOMUNCULETTE'S STORY

London, Earth, September 2169

The Square's a ruin, you can smell that much from here. Scorched concrete and sick air, street-lamps melted into puddles by fusion engines, skeletons of burned-out vehicles sprawled across the pavements. The city's too old and tired to even bother sinking into the dust.

This is where it all started, then. Where the first of the invaders dropped out of the sky, where the local politicians were herded together and incinerated. "Exterminated", I should say. Right there, across the river in Parliament Square. The sky's grey over London, full of pus, full of old pollution. By now, Homunculette will have taken that as his cue to be maudlin and depressive for the rest of the day, the moody old stoat.

All I know about the English weather is this: it plays hell with my monitors. I lost track of Homunculette three minutes ago, and he's the only lifetrace around here. Of course, he could have taken me with him to the Square, but he says I'm not too good on my legs. He likes to think he's better than me at some things. It makes him feel good about being carbon-based.

The ground had vanished from under Homunculette's feet. He wasn't used to the ground doing things like that, so he was too surprised to panic properly as he tumbled towards the river. One moment he'd been standing on the bridge, the next he'd been treading air. Simple as that. No warning, no explanation.

His body twisted as he hit the water, his arms instinctively thrashing around in search of a handhold. He swallowed his first mouthful of sludge before he even knew he was sinking, and felt the chemical pollutants burning the membrane at the back of his throat. The next thing he knew, his feet were touching the thick mat of detritus at the bottom of the river. He felt something crunch under his shoe, though he wasn't sure whether it was plastic or bone. During the invasion, the humans had dumped a lot of their dead down here, leaving the corpses to have their fleshy bits bitten away by the parasite species that had learned to live in the blackwater areas.

So. The bridge had disappeared. From right underneath him. Without a sound.

Anarchitects?

Homunculette suddenly realised he wasn't breathing. He panicked, and thrashed his limbs around for a bit longer, until he remembered that he wasn't *supposed* to be breathing. His respiratory system had gone into emergency shutdown, and he hadn't even noticed it. How long could he stay like this, though? How long did he have before his lungs popped?

One problem at a time, he decided. Anarchitects. Think anarchists. Disembodied intelligences, created by the enemy during the early years of their assault on Gallifrey. According to the information the Celestis had slipped to the High Council, the average anarchist was like a primitive computer virus, a cluster of pre-programmed instructions designed to corrupt and re-order data. But anarchists could exist outside the confines of a computer system. They could infiltrate architecture, inhabit buildings, manipulate corners and angles. They could disrupt the information that held structures together, rebuild whole cities at will.

When the High Council had been told what the things were capable of, they'd thought it was absurd. Then they'd realised that the anarchists were products of the same kind of technology the Time Lords had used to build the early TARDIS models. They'd had always had the knack, but only the enemy had thought of turning the technology into a weapon.

Homunculette tried not to scowl, but it went against his basic nature. Anarchitects. Obviously. The enemy had tracked him and Marie, just like the last time, and they'd taken the bridge away while he'd been crossing from the Albert Embankment to Parliament Square. Homunculette swore, sending bubbles full of expletives up towards the surface of the river. He should have asked Marie to land closer to the Square. He found himself remembering the horror stories he'd heard, about how the Lord Ruthventracolixabaxil had starved to death inside his own TARDIS when an anarchist had hijacked the vessel and turned the central corridor into an endless Möbius loop...

No. No. He couldn't let his imagination get the better of him, not now. He had a mission to

complete, he could complain about the working conditions once it was all over. He was safe under the water, at least, where there were no walls or floors for the anarchist to possess. So, he could try moving across the bottom of the river, getting as close to Parliament as possible before making any attempt to break the surface. If he was lucky, he might even shake off the anarchist that way.

If he was lucky. Right.

Everyone stays away from this part of London, apparently. It smells of politics and bad radiation.

This city was a major population centre, once. One of the twelve key political sites on the planet, according to the Matrix records. The invaders came here, in their little toy saucers, letting Earth know it was hopelessly outgunned, casually wiping out the odd city by way of demonstration. When the demand for surrender came, some of the politicians sealed themselves into the Parliament buildings, and let the aliens set the corridors alight with them still inside.

Not out of principle. Politicians don't have principles, not even on this side of Mutter's Spiral. They just had nowhere else to go.

Wait. The weather must be clearing up, I'm getting traces again. Lifetraces, two of them, from inside one of the buildings. Homunculette must be one, so who's the other?

Broadly speaking, the House of Commons hadn't changed much in the 300 years since its construction. There'd been a renovation every half-century or so, the odd terrorist bombing to blow out the windows or gut the offices, but for the most part it was still the same old monstrosity it had always been.

Homunculette regarded the corridors of power with a mixture of contempt and disinterest. This, according to the High Council's Information, was where he'd find the Relic. If the Matrix was right, it had belonged to the human military for the last century or so. When the invasion had come, and Earth society had collapsed overnight, all the trinkets the military had collected over the years had been dispersed, falling into the hands of the looters and the traders. One such individual, the Matrix data claimed, was holed up here.

Homunculette kept moving along the oak-panelled passages of the House, idly wiping the black river-sludge from his hands onto the lapels of his suit. The High Council had infopacked enough data about local culture for him to be able to find his way around, at least. There were still scorch marks on the walls, plus patches of ash where secretaries and security guards had been gunned down by the invaders, but other than that the corridors were cleaner than Homunculette would have expected. Well lit, too, by neon striplights that seemed to have been fitted quite recently. Signs of habitation, Homunculette deduced. Someone was in residence here, despite the local taboos about the Haunted Ground of Westminster.

A few years ago, these passages would have been crawling with invaders. Homunculette imagined them killing off the local politicians, issuing commands in their stupid tin voices. Invaders always took out the leaders first, it was a standard tactic. Like the enemy's first strike on Gallifrey, their botched attempt to kill off the High Council. "Botched": meaning, the Time Lords had been lucky.

Earth had been lucky, too. It had been invaded, yes, but only by a bunch of mindless bio-mechanoids with speech impediments. The Time Lords, meanwhile, were up against something *really* dangerous.

From somewhere up ahead, there was a hissing, crackling sound. Homunculette froze, and his breathing switched itself off again. Moments later, the crackling was drowned out by a voice, smooth and feminine, but gargling static.

'Every time we say goodbye, I cry a little...'

Definitely a human lifetrace, somewhere near the centre of the House. I can smell Homunculette moving in on it. Smell? Bad vocabulary. Some day, I'll have to devise a proper terminology for sub-organic sensory experiences.

No, maybe not. I'd be the only one who'd understand it.

Homunculette didn't know much about English architecture, but he knew a debating chamber

when he saw one. The hall was ringed with balconies and camera nests, and, by the look of them, the seats on either side of the hall – two great banks of them, all covered in sickly green leather – had been in place for centuries. The patch of floor at the centre of the chamber was graced by a mosaic. The pattern was faded, but Homunculette knew enough local history to recognise the symbol of the World Zones Authority.

'I can hear a lark somewhere, waiting to sing about it...'

The mosaic wasn't the focal point of the debating chamber, though. Nor were the plastic mannequins, three or four hundred of them, each seated in one of the chairs, their faces painted with mad eyes and twisted smiles. Nor were the weapons, the thousands upon thousands of old firearms that had been pinned to the walls like butterflies, hanging by their trigger-guards from rusted nails. Nor were the speakers, four huge black cuboids set into the corners, making the floor vibrate as they pumped out the song Homunculette had heard from the corridors.

'There's no love song finer...'

No. The focal point of the chamber was its other living occupant, who sat on a faded throne directly between the two seating blocks, his legs draped lazily over one of the arms of the chair.

The man's skin was black. Pure black. His skin tone wasn't purely genetic, by Homunculette's reckoning; decades of exposure to pollutants and alien radiation had done their bit, as well. The Black Man had dark braided hair, stuffed under a top hat that looked older than Parliament itself, while his clothes were expensive-but-frayed, probably looted from one of London's many *nouveau riche* corpses. His topcoat was black, his suit was black, his tie was black. In fact, the darkness of him was only broken up by two things.

The first was a flower, a brilliant red bloom pinned to his lapel. Artificial, Homunculette guessed, maybe grown in a plastogene tube. The second was his smile. A white, beatific smile, the kind of white that needs chemical applications to maintain.

'...but how strange the change, from major to minor...'

The Black Man waved his hand. Some mechanism in the chamber must have noticed the movement, because the music stopped in an instant.

'Ella Fitzgerald,' he drawled, as if that explained everything.

The Black Man's eyes were shut, Homunculette realised. Cautiously, he moved down the aisle towards the throne, inspecting the mannequins on either side of him as he walked. Their faces were grotesque, all leers and snarls.

'All my ministers,' the Black Man said, although he hadn't opened his eyes, and he hadn't stopped smiling. *'Not so much to say, these days.'*

Homunculette stopped a couple of metres in front of the throne. *'You sell weapons?'* he asked. *'People come here to buy guns from you? Is that it?'*

The Black Man opened his eyes, at last. His irises, Homunculette saw, were as dark as his skin. *'They've always sold weapons in this place,'* the Black Man said. *'Weapons to their friends, weapons to their enemies. Got the works. Plasma rifles. You want plasma rifles? Real ex-military. Got pistols, got mortars. Even got alien bigshot guns. Expensive, those alien bigshot guns.'* His smile widened ever so slightly, and his face wrinkled up, making him look several decades older than he had before.

Having said that, Homunculette wasn't sure how old he'd looked before. *'Relics. I'm interested in relics. That's all.'*

The Black Man laughed at that. The laugh was almost subsonic. *'What kind of relics you thinking of? Relics that go "boom"?''*

Homunculette shook his head, then leaned forward, so he could hiss the next three words without the mannequins hearing.

'The Toy Store,' he said.

The Black Man didn't reply straight away. Homunculette watched his irises widening, blotting out the whites of his eyes. Homunculette wondered if the man was using some kind of narcotic. It'd explain the smile, anyway.

'Expensive,' the Black Man said, eventually.

'Not important,' Homunculette snapped.

The Black Man nodded. *'Whatever you say. Got most of the stuff they kept in the Toy Store. Got things the Cybermen left behind, back in the 2030s. Got real Ice Warrior relics, from before*

they dropped the rock. Your kind of line?’

‘No. I’m looking for something specific. A box. A casket. Two metres long, made of metal. It’s got –’

‘Sorry,’ the Black Man cut in. ‘Can’t help you.’

Homunculette flinched. What was that supposed to mean? ‘It’s important,’ he insisted.

‘Can’t help you.’ The Black Man shrugged, and stretched, but he didn’t stop grinning. ‘Try next door. Try the zombie-men in the House of Lords. Hah-hah.’

Homunculette bared his teeth. ‘Listen to me. You don’t know who I represent. We want the Relic, and we know it’s here. We scanned this planet’s entire timeline. We worked out that this was the most opportune moment to remove it.’ He emphasised the bit about scanning the timeline. If this man dealt in alien technology, he’d probably heard of the Time Lords, even if it was just as a rumour.

The Black Man didn’t look impressed, though. ‘Don’t got it,’ he said. ‘Had it.’

Homunculette felt himself blanch. ‘You... had it?’

‘Had it. Went.’

No. No, no, no. The High Council had been sure this timeframe was the best era to seize the Relic. If the Black Man had already sold it, it meant...

...that someone else had intervened.

Someone time-active.

The enemy?

‘We need it,’ Homunculette gibbered. ‘You don’t understand. We need it. The war... if we’re going to stand a chance...’ He stumbled towards the throne, fists clenched, adrenaline glands working overtime. He guessed there were probably self-targeting defence systems around the chamber, homing in on him even now, but at this stage he didn’t much care. The Black Man threw up his arms, presumably in a gesture of peace.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Careful.’ Calmly, he reached into the pocket of his topcoat. ‘Matter of fact, my buyer... the man in question... said there’d be someone else turning up after the property. Left a message. See?’

He held something out for Homunculette to inspect. Homunculette blinked. It was a card, like a business card, but thinner than paper and a brilliant silver in colour. Cautiously, he took it from the Black Man’s hand, then turned it over in his palm. The card was covered in scratches and swirls, which seemed to reorganise themselves as he watched, forming words in High Gallifreyan. He noticed a set of co-ordinates, apparently for a TARDIS navigational system.

‘An invitation?’ Homunculette queried.

‘See? You want the property, you go talk to the new owner.’ The Black Man leaned back on his throne. ‘You want any bigshot guns, you come back, hah?’

Homunculette looked up at him, but the man had already closed his eyes. He waved at the walls, and the female voice started shaking the floor again.

‘...every time we say goodbye.’

Oh look. Here comes Homunculette. He’s snarling, I see. I suppose that means we’ll be reporting another mission failure.

It took Homunculette almost an hour to get back to Marie. He decided it was something to do with the anarchitect moving the landmarks around, but when he told Marie this, she insisted he’d just got himself lost. ‘I didn’t detect any anarchitect,’ she said, pointedly.

They stood in the spot where they’d arrived on Earth, next to a great grey slab of roadway on the other side of the river. In her current body, Marie was a good head taller than Homunculette, her skin the same colour as chocolate, her hair plaited behind her back. Her clothes would probably have been fashionable in the earlier half of the twenty-second century, although 2169 was a notorious fashion blackspot, apparently.

‘I told you, the bridge vanished from under me,’ Homunculette grumbled.

‘Are you sure you didn’t just fall off it?’

Homunculette gave her his best scowl. ‘Open up,’ he said.

Marie sighed, then drew a line across her face with her finger, from the centre of her forehead

to the tip of her chin. Her head opened up obligingly, the crack unfolding into a doorway big enough to accommodate a decent-sized humanoid.

Homunculette vanished into her interior, and her face folded itself back into the usual configuration behind him. Seconds later, she dematerialised with a wheezing, groaning sound.

'Any ideas who left the invitation?' Marie asked.

Homunculette looked up. High above him, the dome of the console room resolved itself into a map of the local time contours. Marie stretched fluorescent lines between the bumps and eddies, using the co-ordinates on the invite card to calculate the shortest possible route from twenty-second century England to their new destination.

'You're the one with the databanks,' Homunculette said. 'You tell me.'

Like all type 103 TARDIS units, on the outside Marie resembled an inhabitant of whatever environment she happened to land in. And like all type 103 TARDIS units, on the inside she tended to make her presence felt as a disembodied voice. Every now and then, Homunculette got the nasty feeling she was starting to develop delusions of godhood. 'I see we're heading for more Earth co-ordinates,' Marie mused, neatly changing the subject. 'I wish we could go somewhere exotic for a change. *Hic!* I feel like flexing my gravity compensators. If I spend one more day in a G-type environment, I'll get rickets.'

'Stop complaining or I'll take you back to Dronid.'

'Sadist. Now, let's see. We're heading for an East Indian location, about a century in the relative past. Hmm. Actually, I don't think I've got anything suitable to wear. I have an Amazonian supermodel on file, but that's about as near to the mark as I can get. I'm going to have to pick up some decent fashion accessories once we get there.'

'We're going to have to do something about that Narcissus complex of yours,' Homunculette scowled.

'If you give an intelligent entity a chameleon circuit, you can hardly expect her not to develop a sense of vanity. And don't bother getting comfortable, by the way. We arrived in the East Indies ReVit Zone twenty-four seconds ago, local time.'

'I know,' said Homunculette. 'I heard you hiccup. One of these days, we're going to have to get that fixed, as well.'

2

STRANGE MEN AND THEIR COMPANIONS

According to the calendar on her wristwatch (Japanese design, capable of telling the time at thirty leagues below sea level and going “eep” right in the middle of school assembly), Samantha Angeline Jones had known the Doctor for seven months, three weeks, and six days. By Sam’s reckoning, this meant he said or did something profoundly strange every 2.1 hours, on average. Including the hours when Sam was asleep, natch. Often, she’d wake up in her room on board the TARDIS in the early hours of the (relative) morning, only to discover that the Doctor had done two or three deeply inexplicable things during the night, leaving the evidence lying in messy little heaps around the ship’s corridors.

But today was a good day for high strangeness, even by the Doctor’s standards. Since she’d woken up, Sam had been mystified by a grand total of five different things.

Strange thing number one: the Doctor’s departure. Sam had wandered into the grand dome of the TARDIS console room to find him preparing to leave the ship. The doors had been open, and he’d been standing at the threshold, straightening his jacket as if readying himself for an important boardroom meeting. He would have looked pretty smart, if it hadn’t been for the grappling hook slung over his shoulder.

Strange thing number two: the Doctor’s explanation. He’d looked almost embarrassed when he’d seen Sam, and had accelerated his rate of jacket-straightening accordingly. ‘Going for a quick game of chess,’ he’d said. As he’d walked out of the TARDIS, he’d warned her not to follow him under any circumstances. Sam had obeyed his instructions, for once. Just to prove she could, really.

Strange thing number three: the computer simulation. After the Doctor had left, Sam had sniffed around the console room for a bit, for the simple reason that she didn’t often get the chance to fondle the controls without having the backs of her hands slapped. She’d found a computer monitor screen set into one of the panels, a screen she’d never noticed before, so either it was a new addition to the layout or it had only recently been unearthed from beneath the bits of hardware and empty yoghurt pots that kept cluttering up the console. Like everything else on the TARDIS, the computer had looked positively anachronistic. The graphics had been bright and blocky, the kind you used to get on those crap old microcomputers they had in schools back in the ‘80s.

On the display, there’d been a crude representation of an office block, a grey slab covered in big square windows. Stuck to the side of the building, tilted at ninety degrees so its base was attached to the outside wall, there’d been a rectangular blue blob. The TARDIS, Sam had guessed.

As she’d watched, an animated graphic had popped out of the building. A little pink man, tumbling from a top-floor window. The man-graphic had fallen in an arc, dropping past the TARDIS and vanishing off the bottom of the screen, while at the top of the display the computer had reeled off a series of complex equations to do with the figure’s descent velocity. After a while, another man had fallen out of the window, at a different angle, but he’d also missed the TARDIS.

The little men had kept coming, until, finally, one had hit the tiny TARDIS. Immediately, the man had vanished, and the TARDIS graphic had flashed victoriously. Then the whole sequence had begun again, starting with the first, doomed, pink leaper.

Strange thing number four: the Doctor’s re-entry. While Sam had been trying to figure out the point of the computer simulation, there’d been a thumping sound from somewhere behind her. She’d turned, to see the Doctor lying on his back near the TARDIS doors. He’d been sprawled at a peculiar angle, arms outstretched, as if he’d just fallen out of the sky. He hadn’t been carrying his grappling hook.

Sam had folded her arms, which was what she usually did when she wanted an explanation. The Doctor had lain there a while, not moving, a huge grin plastered across his chops. Finally,

he'd sat up, flicking a rogue wisp of hair out of his face.

'Internal gravity compensators,' he'd beamed. 'Do you know, I had no idea whether that would work?'

And finally, *strange thing number five*: the Doctor's sudden determination to be somewhere else. As soon as he'd picked himself up off the floor, he'd darted across to the console and had started hammering new algorithms into the systems, eventually punching (yes, actually punching) the dematerialisation switch. Even now, he was busy darting around the controls, fingering this, wobbling that. Sam hadn't unfolded her arms yet.

'Good game?' she asked, more than a little tersely.

The Doctor answered with a wave of his hand. 'He cheats,' he said. 'I'm sure he cheats. He moves pieces around between regenerations.'

'Who does?'

'The General.' He finally looked up at her, an expression of dopey-eyed concern on his face. Sam realised he was checking out her clothes. 'Are you sure that's suitable?'

Sam looked down at herself. She was wearing what she liked to think of as The Basics, a pair of M&S jeans, army boots she'd found in an Oxfam shop in Shoreditch, and a t-shirt from the TARDIS wardrobe that had apparently been very fashionable in 1976. 'No Idea. I mean, seeing as you haven't told me where it is we're going or anything.'

The Doctor glanced down at the controls again. Sam wondered if he'd already forgotten their destination. 'Borneo. East Indies ReVit Zone. Late twenty-first century.'

'Borneo? That's hot, yeah?'

'Well, quite.'

'No problem, then. Short sleeves and army boots. Good for a sunny day.'

'I said it was hot. I never said it was sunny. Expect erratic weather and severe atmospheric pollution.' The TARDIS ground to a halt as he spoke, the column at the heart of the console coming to rest with an all-conquering *thunk*. As if the ship had run smack bang into the physical universe and bruised its nose.

Sam reached for the lever which, experience had taught her, activated the scanner. The Doctor slapped the back of her hand, and reached for an entirely different lever that did exactly the same job.

The ceiling shimmered, the dome filling up with an image of the environment outside the ship. Sam assumed this was some kind of holographic technique, although the last time she'd said that to the Doctor's face he'd grumbled something about primitive life-forms always trying to bring technology down to their own level. Which was rich, Sam had thought, coming from a man who used maser-modulated artron energy to make toast. A forest canopy painted itself across the ceiling, the branches stretching across a featureless grey sky.

'Late twenty-first century,' noted Sam. 'Some of the rainforests made it, then.'

'No they didn't. That's why this is a ReVit Zone.' The Doctor pressed another switch on the console, apparently at random. As luck would have it, the switch was the one that opened the doors.

Two and a half minutes later, Sam found out why the Doctor had asked about her clothes being suitable.

The heat wasn't the problem. A rainforest, she told herself, isn't just an English forest with the temperature turned up. The background noise, the smell, the prickling feeling you get when the sweat starts pooling up under your arms and your breasts; it's a whole new range of experiences. Heat or no heat, she felt like she needed more clothes, like she had to put on an overcoat and/or a big floppy hat. It was a psychological thing, she realised. Clothes were a defence, a barrier between her body and the environment. She could practically feel the bacteria crawling into her system. The insect bites didn't help, either.

'Also, we're being watched,' said the Doctor, with his usual flair for pseudo-telepathy.

He was inspecting the undergrowth near the TARDIS, striding around the trees with his hands behind his back, politely avoiding the more intelligent-looking plants. Sam scanned the greenery, but the only animal life she could see was a single toucan, eyeing her up from the branches of a tree. Presumably, that was what the Doctor had meant.

'That's not what I meant,' the Doctor said.

Sam considered folding her arms again, but decided it wasn't worth the bother. 'So, what exactly are we doing in this place? Not that I desperately want to get out of here or anything.'

She emphasised the words *I desperately want to get out of here*, but the Doctor didn't take the hint. He started shaking his head. 'Something the General said. The East Indies ReVit Zone. Something to do with me. At least, that's what he implied.'

'What General?'

'The General. I get the nasty feeling there's a loose end somewhere around here, and I'm missing it.'

The Doctor turned to the toucan, and shrugged apologetically. Sam didn't look up at the bird again. Mainly because she was worried she might see it shrugging back. 'Right. Loose ends. What do we look for, exactly?'

'We look for whatever it is the person responsible for the thing we're looking for doesn't want us to find.' The Doctor paused, to let that sink in. Or possibly for breath. 'While we were materialising, the TARDIS noticed something. Something out of phase with the normal event chronology. Have you seen *Brigadoon*, by the way? Big family spectacular. Lots of Scottish people with unconvincing accents.'

'Er... I've seen *Braveheart*, if that's any good.'

'No, it isn't.' The Doctor finally finished shaking his head, as if he'd only just noticed he was still doing it. 'The point is, somewhere around here is an object which only exists at specific predetermined times. I convinced the TARDIS to materialise in phase with it, so whatever the object is, we should be able to find it whenever we like. In theory, anyway.'

Sam clicked her fingers. 'I get it. So, when you said we were being watched...'

'I was talking about Somerset's leopard.'

'Come again?'

'Somerset's leopard. Genetically enhanced panther. Developed on Earth during the 2050s, used as guard dogs by the very rich. Quite a status symbol in Japan, I believe.'

Sam realised his eyes were fixed on something behind her. She duly turned.

She didn't see anything much, but then, in an environment as full of *stuff* as this one, there was plenty you could miss. Lots of colour, lots of detail. Saplings with brilliant green leaves, over-ripe fruits that looked like exhausted mangos, sparkling yellow blooms sheltering between the trees...

Yellow blooms. Perfectly circular yellow blooms, each with a black slit running from top to bottom. Yellow blooms that only grew in pairs, and only in those heavily shaded areas where the forest canopy stopped the sunlight reaching ground level.

The yellow things moved. Staying in pairs. Several wide, cat-like faces began to emerge from the shade, the "blooms" twinkling in their sockets. The background noise of the rainforest, the twitterings and scratchings of the insects, was backed up by a bassline of low growling.

'Not the kind of wildlife you'd expect to find here,' the Doctor went on, helpfully. 'In fact, the ReVit ecosystem isn't designed to accommodate any large predator, although usually -'

'Doctor,' said Sam.

'Hmm?'

'What exactly are we going to do?'

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Very good question. Remind me, did I ever tell you about "Plan B"?'

Lieutenant Bregman looked up at the ziggurat, and tried to remember how to be impressed. Being impressed was harder than it sounded, right now. Partly because she was exhausted after the trek through the forest, but mostly because - having seen an alien Lost City appear out of nowhere in the middle of a mapped ReVit Zone - it was going to take more than smart architecture to make her go funny at the knees.

And wasn't that the first sign of Displacer Syndrome? Accepting the bizarre, the alien, the downright stupid, without question? After the first couple of Cyberman incursions, most of the poor sods who'd managed to get out of UNISYC had ended up either founding religious cults in LA or developing what the military psychiatrists called "extended Quixotism". Seeing windmills as giant alien attack robots, believing tiny little men were living inside their TV sets, that kind of

thing.

All of which made Bregman think of her superior officer. KorteZ was standing at her side, staring up at the stone frontage of the ziggurat. Every centimetre was covered in tiny little ideograms. Bregman wondered if the Colonel was trying to read them all.

'Sir?' she said. He didn't respond. 'Sir, there's nobody here. We were supposed to be met. The invitation...'

'There's somebody up there.'

'Sir?'

'On the roof. There's someone standing on the roof.'

Bregman looked up, but she couldn't see anyone. All she saw were the huge stepped layers of the building, towering over the rest of the City. All of a sudden, she felt incredibly nauseous.

When she looked down again, Colonel KorteZ had vanished.

'Lieutenant?'

Bregman jumped. There was a tunnel in front of her, a rectangular opening in the front of the ziggurat. Another one of those appearing-out-of-thin-air-without-any-warning things, Bregman told herself, and she surprised herself by not being very surprised. She could see the Colonel standing in the passageway, flanked by torches, the firelight bouncing off the hard edges of his face. He was looking back at her impatiently, not understanding why she hadn't followed him in yet.

So Bregman followed him in.

The tunnel was strangely comfortable. No carpets or furnishings, but comfortable anyway. The walls were smooth, unmarked by the spaceman carvings, and somehow the light from the torches managed to make the place look cosy instead of horrifying. The corridor felt like it had been air-conditioned, although there weren't any visible signs of ventilation. The chic of an Incan ruin, thought Bregman, but with all the mod cons thrown in.

The passageway widened out in front of them, eventually becoming a four-way junction. The Colonel stopped moving. The man had a vaguely bemused look on his face, Bregman noticed. But then, he usually did. When things weren't what they seemed.

'You're correct, Lieutenant,' KorteZ told her.

'Sir?'

'We should have been met. Recon.'

'Recon? Colonel, I don't -'

'You will stay here, at the point we will refer to as junction number one. You will wait for my return, or for the arrival of the party we're due to meet. Is that clear?'

'Yeah, but... I mean, is that our best option, Sir? If we're separated...'

'This is not to be considered a hostile environment, Lieutenant. This is a mission of diplomacy. We are not to anticipate aggression of any kind.'

Bregman coughed apologetically. 'Yes, Sir.'

KorteZ nodded, then marched off along the passageway directly ahead. Bregman watched the way he moved. Stiff limbs, mechanical movements. He walked like he talked, she thought. She tried squinting into the darkness in front of him, but she couldn't see the end of the passage, not from here.

'Terrific,' she hissed, as soon as he was out of sight. She wrapped her arms around herself. Not that she was cold. You couldn't be cold, out here in the Indies. She felt exposed, though, had done ever since she'd arrived on the island. Being here, in the alien stronghold, didn't make her feel any more secure.

Alien. Oh, Jesus, yes. KorteZ had seen someone on the roof, he'd said, but he hadn't gone into detail. At the very least, Bregman should have asked. Somebody human? Somebody humanoid?

She remembered the book, the little pocketbook, the one she'd been issued with when she'd been awarded 19-L security clearance by UNISYC Central. Typical of UNISYC, it had been called *The Eye-Spy Book of Alien Monsters*, and between the covers there'd been profiles of every ET species the organisation had ever shot at. The Cybermen had been on the first page, unsurprisingly, but the book had gone on to describe such obscure and exciting species as the Martians, the Selachians, the Krynoids, the Hurgalnooks, the Bandersnatchers, and the Rock-Eating Yellow-

Bellies.

She'd been ordered to memorise the book, then eat it. Only later, when she'd gained 20-L clearance, had she been informed that the book was a credulity test. Only a handful of the BEMs in it were real. The rest had been invented by some idiot in Central's Training Division. The first sign of insanity, her superiors had chuckled, was when you read the book and believed every word of it.

Oh, and you weren't really supposed to eat it, either.

Somebody spoke.

Bregman panicked.

'Hello?' she said. She turned, checked the corridor, saw nothing.

Somebody spoke again.

Too quietly to make out the words, though. Come to think of it, there might not have been any words. Or even any noises.

No noises. Bregman tried to get a grip on what she was thinking. She'd definitely heard something, but it was as if the sound had gone right into her skull, not stopping at her ears first. Subsonics, then? She tried to identify the direction the non-sound had come from, and decided on a side-passage, the one to the left.

Uh-huh. But this was a real horror flick moment, right? Cue innocent female character, hearing a noise and going off to investigate alone. Ready to have her arms bitten off by the alien monster round the corner.

Alien monster. Sobering thought, around here. Bregman stopped moving.

The side-passage was much like the main corridor, but there were doorways on either side, half a dozen in all. She couldn't make out the far end of the corridor, although that was where the sound seemed to be coming from. Ahead. Ahead, and down.

She listened. No, she didn't need to listen. And it wasn't subsonics, it went deeper than that. If the sound was reaching her brain without touching her ears... telepathy? Maybe. Bregman had been given a "what to do in case of psionic attack" lesson at the college in Geneva, but the advice had been vague; even Central still wasn't sure about the psychic stuff. She tried to remember which of the aliens in the Eye-Spy book were supposed to have telepathic abilities. The Time Lords did. The Quirkafleegs did. Or were they made up?

Bregman suddenly found she was moving again, wandering towards the source of the noise. She stopped.

She stopped right next to one of the doorways.

There was movement from the room inside. Bregman turned her head.

As far as she could make out, the room was almost entirely bare. But then, the furnishings weren't the first thing on her mind. There was a simple bunk on the other side of the chamber, opposite the doorway, a single figure perched on its edge. The figure's feet were on the floor, its shoulders hunched, its features lit by the guttering torches.

It was human. Humanoid. Male. Wearing clothes. What kind of clothes? Bregman found it hard to care. It had a head, a normal-shaped head, and the face...

The face moved as she watched. The skin broke open before her eyes. Folds unfolded, wrinkles readjusted themselves. Sharp white objects, hard and solid, emerged from the flesh.

Smiling. That was all it was doing. Smiling. Oh, God. The face was just a face, a normal face, but everything that made a human being really human had been sucked out of it. It was as if her mind couldn't accept this collection of features as a face at all. She could only see it as a lump of skin and bone, couldn't attach any humanity to it, the way you were supposed to when you came face-to-face with another living thing.

The man on the bed kept smiling. A dead man's grin. Like he knew what the rest of the world would think of him, and didn't much care. Bregman felt muscles twitch behind her cheeks. She realised some part of her unconscious had responded to him, was trying to smile back. At the same time, her hand was reaching for her belt, trying to find her gun.

But of course, she wasn't carrying a gun. This was a mission of diplomacy. This wasn't to be considered a hostile environment.

'Biodata,' said the Doctor.

'What *a-huh* about it?' said Sam.

'I knew there was something wrong as soon as we stepped out *huh-huh* of the TARDIS. We Time Lords have certain *huh* mechanisms built into our own biodata. It makes us *huh-hun* very sensitive to distortions in the biodata around us.'

'You mean *a-huh* like DNA, right?'

'Not just DNA. When I say biodata *huh-huh* I mean something that goes deeper than *huh-huh-huh* simple genetics. In every cell of every organism, there's a mine of information waiting to be *huh* accessed. For example, supposing you travel through a *huh-huh* four-dimensional *huh* feed-back loop in the TARDIS. Because of the various *huh* energies released by the loop, the experience of the *huh-huh-huh-huh* journey will be encoded into the very *huh* essence of your biology. If you know how to read it, you can discover the most remarkable things from *huh biohuhdatahuh*.'

'I didn't *a-huh* know that.'

'No. Well. The human race doesn't really have much need for advanced biodata technology. Genetics is the only *huh-huh* thing your species really cares about. Of course, genetic information does form part of your biodata *huh* matrix, but it's not all there is to it.'

'And you reckon *a-huh a-huh a-huh* someone's *a-huh* fiddled with the biodata of these leopards?'

'I think someone's "fiddled with" the biodata of *huuuuuuh* this whole environment.'

'*A-huh*. OK. Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'How long have we been running, now?'

'Why? Not out of *huh* breath, are you?'

'Who, me? *A-huh*. God, no.'

'Good.'

Without warning, the Doctor let go of Sam's hand. She gurgled in protest, lost her balance, and pitched forward. The Doctor had been dragging her along behind him, as if he'd thought she wouldn't have known how to run on her own. All the time, she'd been able to hear the cats pounding through the undergrowth behind them. In the trees, the toucans had been screeching like car alarms.

Sam pulled her face out of the mulch on the forest floor. For the first time, she realised she was in front of a building.

It reminded her of one of those places you used to see on *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, an old temple covered in scratchy little stick figures. The building was no bigger than a large shed, built out of stone the colour of dental plaque. The Doctor stood in front of the entrance, idly inspecting the carvings around the archway.

Sam cast a glance back over her shoulder. She saw the undergrowth being pushed aside, saw heavy muscles tightening under coffee-coloured fur. But the Doctor was still inspecting the carvings, as though he had all the time in the world.

He was like that, sometimes. He was like that at the worst of times.

Sam opened her mouth to shout out a warning, but a moment later, he was gone, vanished into the mouth of the building. Sam dragged herself off the ground and stumbled after him.

'Oh, good grief,' the Doctor said to himself.

There wasn't much room to move inside the building; most of the space was taken up by the machine. To the naked eye, it was a simple cube, six feet along each side, made from the same material as the building itself. Its surface was covered in panels, all engraved with the same tired old pictograms. All the artistic integrity of wallpaper, the Doctor decided.

He stepped closer to the machine. The bits of him that were human insisted it was nothing more than a block of stone. Fortunately, the bits that weren't knew better. He could feel the effect the device was having on the environment, its little manipulations, its biological gravity. His senses had drawn him to it, pulled him here across the rainforest.

He heard Sam stumble into the building behind him, gasping for breath.

'Doctor -' she began.

'Shhh,' said the Doctor.

He bashed the machine, twice, with his fists. Obliging, one entire panel, two feet wide and two feet high, fell away from the surface. It felt more like plastic than stone, and it bounced when it hit the ground.

The Doctor peered into the space inside the block, examining the internal workings. The technology was fairly straightforward. Various electronic components were jammed into the interior, superdense plastic cables connecting morphogenic fission vials to the biosensory byput systems. There were also a number of little flashing lights, but he had no idea what those were.

He squeezed both his hands into the space. Sam was at his shoulder now, scraping his neck with short, nervous breaths. Outside, the whole forest was growling.

'What –' began Sam.

'It's a security device,' the Doctor explained. 'I thought as much when I saw the leopards.'

He watched Sam's reaction out of the corner of his eye. 'This controls the biodata around here?'

'Not exactly. The ReVit Zone was designed by humans, and humans didn't build this. The machine was planted here by someone else. Someone who wanted to protect their property.'

'Then this thing controls the leopards?'

'And the insects.' The forest kept growling. The Doctor wondered if he'd see a big cat standing in the entrance if he turned around. He made the point academic by not turning round. 'As soon as we stepped out of the TARDIS, I was bitten by something. So were you. If I know my biotechnology, the insects are programmed to take biodata samples from anyone who gets too close. If they decide the visitor's friendly, all's well and good. If not, they call out the guards.' But who'd use a security system this complicated, he wondered, and who were they trying to impress? 'This machine contains biodata samples from everyone who's authorised to be here,' he concluded.

'You mean, like a guest list?'

'Like a guest list. Ah.' The Doctor's fingers touched liquid, brushed the surface of a tiny reservoir deep inside the guts of the machine. A fluid bio-array, then. Perfect. The substance was sticky and rippled expectantly beneath his fingertips. 'Give me your hand.'

'Why?' said Sam. So he ignored her, grabbed her hand anyway, and locked it between his fingers. 'Ow,' she said, as he thrust both his hand and hers into the bio-array.

There was a moment of sheer bodily confusion, as the Doctor forgot exactly who he was and what he was doing. A side-effect of coming into contact with the array, he reasoned. He was becoming part of it, and it was trying to become part of him, trying to force its data into his biosystem. He denied it access, and told it to stay off Sam, as well. The bio-array obliged. It knew better than to argue with a life-form like him.

The Doctor withdrew his hand, and let go of Sam. His fingers weren't even wet. The array had backed down, and now it was keeping itself to itself.

Sam made a sudden gasping sound.

The Doctor turned. One of the panthers was standing at the threshold of the building, its musculature practically filling the archway. Though its body looked tense, there was a faintly bewildered look on its face, as if it had been in the process of doing something important, but had forgotten exactly what.

The Doctor stepped forward. The animal didn't react. He kept walking, until he was right in front of the creature, then reached out for its face.

After a moment's thought, the panther started licking his fingers. The Doctor smiled.

'We're on the guest list,' he said.

Mr Qixotl waddled along the passageway at full tilt, wondering if he'd be able to retain that dignified, professional air even when things were falling apart around his ears. Not that anything had gone wrong, as such. The "property" was safe, Homunculette hadn't got round to physically assaulting him, and everything was going according to schedule.

From the point of view of diplomacy, though, things could have been better.

The humans had turned up at the ziggurat. Two of them, both from UNISYC. Mr Qixotl had been so busy arguing with Homunculette, he hadn't even noticed their arrival until he'd run into the man – Korte, his name was – in one of the tunnels between the entrance and the conference hall. The trouble was, the man had left the other human rep back in the main corridor, and by the

time Mr Qixotl had reached her she'd already stumbled across the guest rooms. At least, she'd stumbled across Trask's guest room. The girl had been at the ziggurat entrance when Qixotl had found her, retching her guts out.

He'd hustled the two humans into the cocktail lounge, the female looking decidedly green around the glands. He'd left them there with a complimentary bottle of something he didn't think they'd find too toxic, saying he'd formally introduce them to the others soon, and assuring KorteZ that yes, actually, the chairs were exactly what they seemed.

Mr Qixotl skidded to a halt in the guest-room corridor. Yeah, OK, so maybe the human woman had a point. Trask wasn't an easy entity to deal with, not by anyone's standards. Homunculette looked the same as any other humanoid, and you even got used to the Shift, after a while. Trask, though... it wasn't as if there was anything physically wrong with the man, as such. If you saw a photo of him, you'd think he was perfectly normal. It was only when you saw him, in the flesh, that you realised.

The signals he gave off. The zombie body language. He didn't move like a living thing. Mainly because he *wasn't* a living thing.

Mr Qixotl steeled himself, then walked up to the doorway of Trask's room.

'Afternoon, Mr T,' he said, trying to sound cheery. 'I hear you had a little visitor.'

Trask was sitting on the bed, a skeletal smile fixed on his face. The girl had said he'd been smiling, Qixotl remembered. He wondered if Trask had changed his facial expression since she'd been here.

'Yes,' said Trask. 'This room has no door.'

His voice, like his face, had absolutely no trace of life in it. Qixotl had to concentrate just to figure out what the words he said actually meant. 'Yeah. Sorry about that. Design oversight. Not too much of a problem, I hope?'

'No. Mr Qixotl?'

'Erm, yeah?'

'I want to speak to you. In private.'

Something turned in Qixotl's stomach. 'Bit on the busy side right now, Mr T. Delegates turning up all over the place and everything. Maybe later on we can figure something out, yeah?'

'You know who I represent,' Trask creaked.

Mr Qixotl glanced around the room, hoping to find an excuse to end the conversation. Unsurprisingly, there wasn't one. Trask's room was bare, apart from the bunk. 'I know, Mr Trask, I know. Look, I won't tell any of the others, if that's what you're worried about. Discretion's assured, yeah? A lot of the other bidders haven't made their, er, their allegiances exactly public, if you follow me.'

'I want to make a deal.'

Qixotl stared at him. Then wished he hadn't. 'Well, yeah. I mean, you'll have your chance to make your bid -'

'No. I want to make a deal. With you. Confidentially. Before the auction.'

'That's not exactly, y'know, regular,' said Mr Qixotl.

'I know,' said Trask.

There were a lot of guest rooms in the ziggurat. More, in fact, than would ever be needed. The lowest level was a veritable labyrinth of corridors, peppered with pseudo-stone chambers full of warm air and torchlight. There was absolutely no need for any more rooms to be added.

Nevertheless, a new doorway spontaneously appeared in the wall of one of the side-passages, materialising with an ugly grating sound which - according to one popular mythology, at least - was the sound of Time itself groaning in agony. In defiance of the normal laws of spatial dimension, a new set of rooms appeared on the other side of the doorway.

After a while, two figures stepped out into the corridor, and stood there for a few moments, surveying their surroundings. The shorter of the two wore a Victorian funeral gown, heavy skirts sweeping the floor, a dark veil pulled across her face. The taller figure wore a suit, just as sombre in style. Not exactly elegant, but certainly formal. Ceremonial, even.

Beneath the woman's veil was a face of raw bone. The snout was sharp, the jaw was set into a permanent leer, and there were jagged holes on either side of the face, empty spaces where the

delicate mechanisms of the ears should have been. The features of a skeleton, the skull of an enormous bat. The man's face was, to all intents and purposes, identical.

The two figures locked arms, then turned, as one. They moved off along the corridor, at a pace that could only have been described as "relaxed".

Two more of Mr Qixotl's guests had arrived in the ziggurat.

3

LOATHING THE ALIEN

Every now and then, Sam found herself thinking of the Doctor as a set of responses, not a man – half-man – *person* – at all. Maybe, just maybe, that was the only way a poxy human mind like hers could come to terms with him. As an equation, rather than a living being. A function of the universe, whose purpose was to (a) break into places and (b) break out of them again. It didn't matter whether he was dealing with a cast-iron padlock or a bunch of genetically engineered toucans. Security devices would take one look at him and give up.

The wall of the "Lost City" hadn't been far from the outhouse where the Doctor had found the biodata machine. He'd strolled right through the City archway without a second thought, head in the air, hands behind his back. He'd made straight for the central pyramid, sniffing disdainfully at the smaller buildings around it. 'Shoddy workmanship,' he'd mumbled, more than once.

They were inside the pyramid now. Sam had seen a lot of corridors over the last few months, but the passages here were something new. No vent shafts or strip lighting, for a start. Lots of quivering shadows, lots of flickering torches. More like the cloister room of the TARDIS than, say, the connecting tunnels on board the *Quetzal*. These corridors were more...

'Corridory,' Sam suggested, accidentally saying it out loud.

A couple of metres ahead of her, the Doctor stopped at a three-way junction. He seemed to have heard her, for once.

'Yes, they are, aren't they?' he muttered. He surveyed the junction for a moment or two, then licked his finger and held it in the air. 'Purity of architecture. Most corridors are built to be functional, but this one's supposed to give the impression of *being* a corridor, judging by the feel of it. Are you psychic, at all?'

Sam suddenly realised the Doctor had turned to face her. She saw big blue-green eyes in the half-light. Staring, not bothering to blink. You could tell, by the look on his face, that the Doctor thought his eyes were full of madness and poetry.

They weren't, though. In a previous life, this had probably been his best hypnotising stare, but his face was built differently now. Sam knew all about the Doctor's previous lives, the other bodies he'd lived in and lost over the years. She also knew that "this" Doctor, "her" Doctor, still didn't really understand what he looked like, or appreciate the impression he left on the rest of the universe. How long had he been walking around like this? Three years, by his reckoning? And he hadn't figured out who he was yet.

Just for a second, she felt sorry for him. Because he wanted to be a force of nature again, he wanted to be the incredible escaping equation all the time, but instead he was trapped in a half-human body with a baby-face and floppy curls.

'Psychic?' Sam queried.

The Doctor broke off the stare. 'There's something here. Something trying to make contact. I can almost feel...' He punctuated the sentence by jumping up and down. Testing the gravity, maybe. 'Beneath our feet. Something beneath our feet. Throwing out tendrils.'

'OK, let me try and translate this into English. Somebody in this pyramid's trying to make psychic contact with you, is that what you're saying?'

'It's not a pyramid. It's a ziggurat.' A new expression materialised on his face. It took Sam a few moments to identify it as a look of pure hurt. Like a child whose parents had just told him that he smelled. 'It doesn't want to talk to me. Every time it comes close, it pulls away. It's trying to make contact, but it's...'

The sentence ended in mid-pontification. The Doctor moved, faster than Sam could follow. With one smooth motion, he turned, and leapt back down the passageway towards her. A second later, he was standing with his back pressed against the corridor wall, pulling Sam towards him. His hand was clamped across her mouth before she'd even managed to open it.

There was a second or two of absolute silence. Then there were footsteps. Human footsteps, by

the sound of them. Around the corner. Getting closer.

Two figures walked past the corridor where Sam and the Doctor stood, moving across the mouth of the t-junction. Sam watched them go by, but the figures didn't even glance in her direction. The torchlight turned the two newcomers into smudges of orange and black. Sam tried to focus on the contours of their clothes, the details of their faces...

She hiccuped. Somehow, she managed to do it silently.

Eventually, the figures disappeared along the tunnel. The Doctor held Sam still for another minute or so, making sure the coast was clear before he let her go. Sam started spitting as soon as she was free of him.

'Yeuch,' she said.

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes. They weren't very attractive, were they?'

'I was talking about your hand. Do all Time Lords taste of chicken, or is it just you?'

The Doctor paused for a second, as if considering sticking one of his forgers into his mouth to test it, then frowned. 'Now is not the time, Sam.'

'Yeah, I know. Those two. I thought they were human, but...'

'But?'

'They didn't have faces. Skulls. They had bare skulls. Not human skulls, either.'

The Doctor looked pensive. 'Half-human, half-bat. How did they make you feel?'

God, it was a hell of a day for questions. 'Well, they were kind of... I don't know. They didn't make me feel anything, much. Oh, right. I think I know what you're getting at. Every time I've been near an alien so far, I've been able to feel it. Like there was something different about them. Present company not excepted.' The Doctor looked indignant, much to Sam's satisfaction. 'But those two didn't make me feel anything. They might as well have been a couple of people in masks. Right?'

The Doctor peered along the tunnel after the skull-people. 'They *were* a couple of people in masks. The Faction recruits agents from all sorts of races.' He wriggled his shoulders, feigning a shudder. 'I'm still picking up biodata traces. More intense than usual. Being in contact with that machine must have heightened my senses.'

'The Faction?'

The Doctor seemed suddenly irritated, as if the thrill of explaining things to stupid humans had finally worn thin. He reached into his jacket. 'Faction Paradox. It's a family affair.'

'A what?'

A book emerged from the arcane depths of the Doctor's inside jacket pocket. It was a small paperback, and it looked as though it had spent the last couple of centuries hanging around in a loft somewhere. His eyes still fixed on the passage, the Doctor pressed it into Sam's outstretched hands, although Sam was sure her hands hadn't been outstretched the last time she'd checked. Strange thing number eighty-nine, she decided.

The cover of the book was black, marked with hundreds of tiny white wrinkles and speckled with cartoonish drawings of galactic spirals. Or were they swirls of DNA? Whatever. Splashed across the cover, in blocky white letters that might have been used for the titles of a biblical epic starring Charlton Heston, were the words GENETIC POLITICS BEYOND THE THIRD ZONE. Under that was the author's name – GUSTOUS R THRIPISTED – and, in smaller letters, the words HARD-COPY POCKET EDITION. A dead wasp was stuck to the spine.

Sam flicked through the yellowed pages. Yellowed by spilt coffee, she guessed, not age. There was no sign of an index, but the corner of one page was turned down, close to the end of the book. She skim-read some of the text there. Not an easy task, in this light.

Even in primitive cultures, where temporal physics is considered to be little more than science fiction, people are aware of the problems time travel can cause. Perhaps the most famous of all the four-dimensional conundrums is the so-called "Grandfather Paradox". Suppose, goes the argument, I were to travel into the past and murder my own grandfather, as a young man. If I did this, my father would never exist, and so – logically – neither would I. However, if I never existed, I could never have travelled back in time and murdered my grandfather. Hence, my father did exist, and so I did travel back in time and murder my grandfather... and so on and so forth.

But in time-active cultures such as that of the Time Lords, these paradoxes are more than mere fantasy. To them, the perils of time travel are harsh realities, and Time Lord folk stories are full of cautionary tales about characters who inadvertently murder their own ancestors, or disobedient children who break the First Law of Time (though there is some disagreement in Time Lord society as to what the First Law actually is). For Gallifreyans, the word "Paradox" has the same connotations that the word "Sethite" did for the ancient Osirans, or that the word "Satan" still does for many human tribes. "Paradox" is the greatest imaginable evil, the dark side of the time-travelling lifestyle, a horror never to be mentioned in polite society...

Paradox. As in, Faction Paradox. The folded page was an introduction to the Faction. Sam looked up, to ask the Doctor if this was pure coincidence, or if he'd planned it that way.

But the Doctor wasn't there. Sam scowled, and squinted into the gloom at the far end of the passage. Halfway along it, she spotted a blur of green velvet, striding off into the depths of the ziggurat, apparently in pursuit of Mr and Mrs Bat-Head.

She glanced down at the book again.

Inevitably, there are those who have a morbid fascination with such evils. Just as the human race has spawned "Satan-worshippers", at least one group exists which has dedicated itself to the study of Paradox, turning its back on traditional Time Lord values and instead embracing a form of dark shamanic spiritualism. Indeed, this group is not unlike one of the voodoo cults of Mutter's Spiral, with its own pantheon of spirits and demons, and its own occult rituals. The group is known as Faction Paradox, and it's hard to describe the dread this name conjures up in the minds of the Time Lord archons...

Sam adjusted her scowl by a millimetre or two, then followed the Doctor. She threw the book over her shoulder as she walked, leaving it lying in the middle of the passageway. She had a suspicion that the Doctor's pockets would be able to grow another copy at a moment's notice, if they needed to.

Homunculette poured himself another glass of whatever it was in the bottle. He wasn't sure how much of the stuff he'd drunk, but he was still in control of all his facilities. Predictably.

'Can't get drunk,' he said. 'I'm damned if I'm not going to try, though.' He turned to the woman sitting at the bar next to him. 'Have you been to Simia KK98, ever?'

Sheepishly, the woman shook her head.

'No. And you know why, don't you? Because you're human, that's why. Too stupid to go anywhere.' He started slooshing the stuff around in his glass, trying to make the clots of green go away. On KK98, his House had spent whole months like this. Sealed into the silos under the permafrost, waiting for the enemy probes to finish scanning the surface. His entire House. Doing their best to get drunk, or to go mad, or to do anything that'd stop them thinking for a while. Other species had it easy. Other species weren't alcohol-immune. Humans would have been able to drink themselves blind in the darkness, singing songs of affectionate comradeship and making jokes that wouldn't have been funny to anyone on this side of the consciousness threshold.

The human woman wrinkled her nose. Homunculette wondered if she was sniffing at the stuff in the glass, or at the stuff on his suit. He didn't much care. Her problem, not his.

Unless you counted the Shift, which Homunculette didn't, there was only one other person in the cocktail lounge. The male human, Colonel something. Homunculette thought about the officers in the Time Lord Last Wave, the old men who'd force-regenerated themselves until their skins had been covered in black organic blast-proofing. Then he thought about the fat idiot in the green shirt, sitting at a table at the back of the lounge, staring into space. The contrast was almost laughable.

The cocktail lounge was yet another stone-walled room near the heart of the ziggurat, this one fitted with a bar and more drinks cabinets than Homunculette could be bothered counting. The furnishings didn't match the style of the architecture, here. Even if you were in the middle of the Unthinkable City, Qixotl had said, a cocktail lounge had to look like a cocktail lounge. There were some laws of the universe that just couldn't be broken.

The human woman nervously shifted her backside around on her fake wooden bar stool. 'It's kind of interesting,' she said, obviously forcing herself to make polite conversation. 'The way you drink. You look very... human. Uhh. Or is that an insult where you come from?'

'What do *you* think?' Homunculette slurred.

'No, but really, what I meant was... oh, *God*.'

Something had distracted the woman, had made her look towards the doorway. Homunculette thought about turning to see what she was gawping at. He spent a few moments wondering if it was worth the bother. In the end, he decided that even if it wasn't worth the bother, he'd enjoy complaining about having to make the effort. So he turned.

And spilled his drink.

There were two people standing in the doorway. Something moved around in Homunculette's bowels, the result of a deep-rooted atavistic terror as old as civilisation itself. He felt a wave of interest ripple across the chamber, the Shift's way of pricking up its ears.

The female newcomer lifted her veil, and removed the mask she wore beneath the fabric. It was real bone, Homunculette realised, the front half of a genuine skull. The face under the mask was young, unquestionably human. The woman was in her twenties, her cheekbones sharp triangles under a layer of pale white skin. Red hair was drawn back across her forehead and tied behind her neck. Her eyes were soft, wide, green. Her features weren't as harsh as you'd expect for someone who walked around dressed as a dead bat. To Homunculette, she looked more like a child than anything else. Ready to believe whatever fairy stories she liked the sound of.

'Good afternoon,' she said, politely. Her voice was soft. Cultured. 'My family name is Cousin Justine. This is Little Brother Manjuele. The Spirits are with us, and we hope you'll behave accordingly.'

The security centre was, logically, the best-defended part of the ziggurat; from here, you could shut off all the City's defences, including the ones around the Relic. Mr Qixotl knew – hoped, anyway – the systems would be homing in on him as he shuffled towards the chamber, taking the appropriate biological samples. As always, he experienced a moment of pure paranoia at the doorway of the room, and thought about what might happen if the defences didn't recognise him for some reason. Nothing tried to rip his head off as he stepped through the doorway, though, so he calmed down a bit.

He'd been in Trask's room when the alarms had sounded. He'd been able to hear the toucans, even from the depths of the ziggurat, screeching their parson's noses off out in the forest. Trask had kept talking, regardless.

Mr Qixotl. I have an offer. A personal offer. To make. To you.

Qixotl should have broken off the conversation right there and then, should have scurried off to check the defences. But it was hard, getting away from Trask. Yeah, sure, he made you feel like every living cell in your body wanted to be on the other side of the planet, but when it came to making your muscles move... when you were around Trask, the atmosphere always felt kind of sticky, like the air had died and putrefied in his presence.

Better this way. In private. A private meeting.

So Qixotl had stood there, like a great fat dead thing, watching Trask's jaw bobbing up and down until he'd finished his spiel. He still hadn't got to grips with the deal Trask had suggested. Most of the bidders would be offering technology, weapons data, information, but Trask...

Qixotl. Think. Think about this. Very carefully.

The security centre was, like every other room in the ziggurat, made out of mathematically replicated stone. But the other areas were built for the comfort and convenience of the guests, whereas the security centre was designed to be as repulsive as possible. Currents of cold air swept around the walls, pumped into the chamber through hidden ventilation shafts, the oxygen laced with negative ions, so you felt like there were things crawling over your skin all the time. Bronze gargoyles squatted in the corners, making disgusting rasping noises and breathing out noxious fumes. The room was hung with tapestries, too, depicting various scenes of degradation, mutilation, and humanoid sacrifice. Mr Qixotl had programmed the fibres to move about when they knew no one was looking, so the eyes didn't so much follow you around the room as keep looking over your shoulder in a "behind you!" kind of way.

In the centre of the chamber was the master console. It looked seriously out of place here, 100 per cent state-of-the-art designer hardware, too complex to disguise as a chunk of stone. Mr Qixotl shambled across to the controls, and tapped his foot impatiently as a customised pixscreen began to rise from the surface of the console. The pixscreen gave him the low-down. Something had materialised near the City wall, in resonance with the Brigadoon circuit. Two biological units had left the capsule, and they'd been pursued by the leopards for several minutes before...

Before they'd simply stopped registering. According to the pixscreen, they no longer showed up on the security scan. At least, not as intruders. Mr Qixotl's toes stopped tapping. Outside, the toucans weren't screaming any more. If the intruders had been killed, their bodies would still have registered as alien biodata. Even if the leopards had eaten them, there'd be some kind of trace.

The pixscreen was non-reflective, which was a pity, as Mr Qixotl was quite interested in knowing whether he'd actually gone pale.

His fingers flew across the console, coaxing and cajoling the controls until the pixscreen gave him a visual representation of the biodata inside the security system. The invite cards had been designed to take surface traces from the bidders and transmit the information back to the City's datacore, so the biodata of all those who should have been attending the auction was kept in memory. Qixotl watched the information waltz across the screen. Most of the biodata was human. The two UNISYC reps, the Faction Paradox people (human-plus), Homunculette (human-plus-plus-plus-plus)...

There were two unfamiliar traces on the screen. Mr Qixotl felt his body temperature drop by a good ten degrees. Nobody should have been able to insert new data into the works, not that quickly. To do something like that, you'd need to be biodata ultra-aware. Even a Time Lord wouldn't have been able to manage it. Well, a Time Lord President, maybe, someone who'd worn the Sash of Rassilon and fingered the Great Key, but apart from that...

Oh no.

Not him. Please.

One of the two alien biodata readings was human. Qixotl knew this only because it was so similar to the UNISYC readings. The second trace was different.

He knew that trace. He'd seen it before. The last time he'd seen it, it had been more erratic, a more complex pattern, but there was no mistaking it.

'Him,' Qixotl said, and his voice echoed around the walls of the chamber, becoming a series of hideous slippery noises. 'It's him. It's *him*.'

Faction Paradox shouldn't have been on Earth. Come to think of it, Faction Paradox shouldn't have been anywhere, really.

Somewhere in the back of the Doctor's cerebellum, automatic processes were listening out for Sam's footsteps. She was still there, somewhere behind him in the corridor. Nothing to worry about, then, not yet. The rest of his mind could concentrate on more important...

No.

...on more critical matters.

Back on Gallifrey, in the days when the skies had been the kind of orange you only ever seem to get in childhood memories, the Spirits of the Faction had been numbered among Time's bogeymen, like Rassilon's Mimic or the Great Vampires. Now he'd run into them, twice, within a couple of decades. Twice in two regenerations.

Perhaps it was sheer chance. Or perhaps something had happened to the universe, something so large you couldn't spot it from down here at ground level. Some great cataclysmic event, scattering the Faction's agents across the continuum. The Doctor imagined them infiltrating the whole of history, even infiltrating his own past. Reshaping the timelines so that he kept running into them, time and time again.

Did he have the same history he woke up with, he wondered? Had he ever met the General, before today, or had the man been slotted into his life while he'd been asleep?

Had Sam been here, yesterday?

Had *he* been here?

Maybe four-dimensional voodoo-cults were like buses. You waited all eternity for one, and then... the Doctor shook his head, forced himself to concentrate on the matter in hand. No time

for flippancy. He still had to work out what was happening here in the twenty-first century. The City wasn't the Faction's work. If the cult had designed the ziggurat, it would have been covered in dried blood and screaming skulls.

The Doctor's automatic processes told him to stop walking. He did as the processes told him, and listened. Consciously, this time. Sam was still trotting along behind him, so obviously, something else had alerted his senses. What?

The Doctor turned. To the left. Acting on instinct.

A staircase was set into an alcove there, a set of hard stone steps leading up to the next level of the ziggurat. There was someone standing a few steps up, staring at him. He would have jumped, if he hadn't had several centuries' experience of being crept up on.

The woman was tall. Tanned. Amazonian, even. Not attractive, but well-designed, the same way early twenty-first century automobiles were well-designed, all sleek lines and aerodynamic curves. She was South American, if her clothes and skin tone were anything to go by. She stood absolutely still, not even blinking. A less experienced observer might have assumed she'd been physically trained, maybe as one of those glamorous female assassins human beings seemed to get such a kick out of. The Doctor knew better, of course. The woman was giving off no biodata signals. Organically, a complete blank.

Almost automatically, he grinned, and extended his hand. 'Good afternoon. You must be in charge around here. I was wondering if you could help me. I think I'm a bit lost.'

The woman didn't respond. The Doctor tried to guess what was going through whatever she had for a mind. He tried not to think about Sam. If he even glanced back along the passage, the woman would notice the eye-movement.

He withdrew his hand. 'Ah. Of course. Formal introductions. I was forgetting. How do you do, I'm -'

He finished the sentence there, because he guessed that - if the woman was a security unit, as he suspected - this would be the point at which she'd get sick of his blathering and go for the throat. He expected her to lash out at him, or try to pin him to the ground, or at the very least demand to see his passport.

He definitely didn't expect her to open up her face and unfold it into a gaping black chasm larger than her entire body. However, this is exactly what she did.

'What the hell are *they* doing here?' the alien called Homunculette was screaming.

Bregman tried to figure out the best way of retreating into a corner without anyone noticing her. A couple of minutes ago, the lounge had been quiet, and she'd been close to opening up a meaningful dialogue with Homunculette, albeit a meaningful dialogue in which he kept slugging her off for being a primitive ape-descendant (which begged the question, what was he descended from, exactly?). Even though the letters on the beermats had kept shifting around, trying to get her attention, Bregman had been on the verge of thinking this "first contact" business wasn't going to be as hard as she'd expected.

But everything had gone very wrong very quickly. The two bat-faced people had arrived, and Homunculette had suddenly started shouting and swearing at them. At his table, Colonel Korte had tensed up, his sweaty arms flexing under his shirt, ready for combat. Even the beermats had tried to retreat.

Finally, Mr Qixotl had hurried into the room. So far, Bregman hadn't seen him walk anywhere.

Qixotl thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his suit. He looked like he'd been expecting something like this, sooner or later. 'Not sure what your problem is, Mr H. If you've got, y'know, some kind of personal problem -'

'Faction Paradox! Faction Paradox, for... I mean, look at them! Look!' Homunculette waved his hand at the skull-people, who hadn't moved an inch since he'd begun his rant. "Cousin Justine", her mask held between delicate black-gloved fingers, seemed alert. Even interested. But not insulted.

'We received an invitation,' Cousin Justine told Homunculette, softly. 'Please. There's really no need to be afraid.'

Homunculette spluttered at her, but didn't get as far as forming any words. Bregman realised he was holding an empty bottle in his hand, and for one nasty moment she thought he was going

to chuck it.

'We should be introduced,' said Colonel KorteZ.

All eyes turned on him. The Colonel was standing, facing the two Faction Paradox people. Bregman wondered if he was about to have another funny turn.

'Colonel Joseph KorteZ,' he went on, snapping to attention. 'UNISYC. On behalf of the people of Earth, welcome to our small and beautiful planet.'

Bregman winced. It wasn't a full rendition of the "Greetings, BEM" speech from the UNISYC handbook, but it was bad enough. Nonetheless, Cousin Justine nodded graciously.

Homunculette snorted. 'You're wasting your breath. She's as human as you are. No, I take that back. She's *less* human than you are.'

Cousin Justine looked unshaken. 'We've come on behalf of the Faction. On behalf of the Spirits, and on behalf of the Grandfather himself. I renounce my humanity for the sake of the family.'

'Spirits?' repeated Colonel KorteZ. He sounded genuinely interested. Bregman remembered what she'd heard about him back in Geneva. After Saskatoon, he'd spent a year in India, on one of those spiritual discovery missions the military psychiatrists were always talking about. UNISYC had very nearly put him in the Zen Patrol, after that, which was second-best to a spell in a padded room with soft furniture. Bregman had the horrible feeling this conversation was about to get mystical, big style.

Homunculette started slobbering again before Cousin Justine could answer. 'The Faction's a voodoo cult. Just like your voodoo cults on this rear-end of a planet.'

'We have similar customs,' Justine agreed. 'But, with respect, the family aspires to greater things. We have no dealings with the Spirits of Earth. Only the Spirits of Paradox.'

'"Aspires"?' Homunculette squawked, practically spitting on his opponent, even though they were metres apart. 'You're a bunch of thugs, that's all. Criminals who got lucky. You only wear that... that...' Homunculette gestured towards Justine's mask, presumably not being able to find a suitable word for it. 'You only wear *that* because you want to scare people. Spirits, my backside.'

For the first time, Cousin Justine looked genuinely offended. 'Then we have a conflict of beliefs,' she announced, somehow managing to keep her voice level.

KorteZ was nodding his head off. Mr Qixotl was slowly edging his way back out of the room. Homunculette was still snarling. 'You stole everything you know from us. Your whole... grubby little gang... only exists because of our technology. Go on, try and deny it.'

'That's not -'

'Look. See that? You see it?' Homunculette was looking around the room for support, his finger shaking as he pointed at the bone mask. 'Tell them what it is,' he demanded. 'Go on. Tell them.'

Cousin Justine looked away, only for a moment. 'It's a skull,' she admitted.

'What of? Tell them. What's it the skull of?'

Justine looked uneasy. 'The skull of a Time Lord.'

'Hah!' Homunculette whirled around, like a lawyer who'd just made a devastating attack on the accused. 'See? That's my people she's talking about. My people.'

Bregman gawped. The mask was wider than Homunculette's whole head. She imagined a skull just like it, writhing under the man's skin, bursting out at the edges. Time Lords had dimensional engineering, according to the UNISYC files. Did they have heads that were bigger on the inside than on the outside, or what?

'The Time Lords fought a great war, many years ago,' Cousin Justine explained, addressing the other representatives *en masse*. 'They won. If they'd lost, by the grace of Time, then this is how they would have looked.' She raised the mask a little.

Homunculette snorted again. 'That mask shouldn't exist in this timeline. You see how dangerous they are? Even their headgear breaks the Laws of Time. Even their headgear.' He started laughing, for no immediately obvious reason. Bregman wondered if he was getting hysterical.

Cousin Justine merely nodded. 'Of course. There's great power in these totems. The Time Lords would have us destroy things that shouldn't exist. Only the family understands their value.'

'Oop,' said Mr Qixotl.

Immediately the focus of the situation changed. Mr Qixotl had backed out of the doorway, trying to get as far away from the argument as possible. Unfortunately, he'd backed into someone coming up the passage.

Suddenly, all of Bregman's anxieties, about the ziggurat, about the auction, about the aliens, completely dissipated, only to be replaced with one simple and terrible new sensation. Full-blown body anxiety.

Kathleen Bregman was pale-skinned, 163 centimetres tall, and had hair that stuck together in ugly clumps whenever it was exposed to daylight. She wasn't technically unfit, but whenever UNISYC ran a standard physical QRT her test scores hovered ominously around the 0.6 mark, and she'd never told anyone about the pains in her guts or the needles in her legs when she did the ten-kilometre survival run. Whereas, by contrast, the woman who'd walked into the room was tall, bronzed, and – in a very real sense – perfect. She wasn't even attractive, as such. The way she moved told the world she didn't need to be attractive. If supermodels were as cool as they thought they were, Bregman decided, then this was how they'd look.

The woman manoeuvred past Mr Qixotl without breaking her stride, brushed past the Faction Paradox representatives without a second glance, and stopped in front of Homunculette.

'There may be a problem,' she told him.

Homunculette dropped the bottle. It bounced. 'Problem? What kind of a problem?'

'An intruder.'

Everyone reacted to that, except Kortez. Cousin Justine exchanged glances with her comrade. Mr Qixotl shuffled back into the room, an anxious look on his face. The beermats seemed edgy. Homunculette looked like his head would explode if he heard any more bad news. 'Explain,' he snapped.

'I found someone wandering around the ziggurat. He didn't have an invitation.'

Mr Qixotl cleared his throat. 'Erm, how do you know he didn't have...?'

'I scanned him,' the woman replied, emotionlessly. 'No invitation.'

Homunculette's eyes looked as though they were getting ready to pop out and go walkabout. 'Where is he now?'

'Here,' said the woman. A black hole blossomed from the front of her head, and something almost two metres tall was vomited out of her skull, landing in a messy heap on the floor of the cocktail lounge.

Bregman lost her grip again.

Under his breath, Colonel Kortez recited another mantra. The others were making too much noise for them to be able to hear it. Truth be told, it had been years since Kortez had needed a mantra, but it was all part of the procedure. To an old UNISYC hand, it was as normal as checking your safety-catch or polishing your boots.

The alien woman's face folded back in on itself. The man who'd been belched out of her head lay motionless on the floor, face-down, clearly unconscious. The other representatives were moving in on him, curious looks on their faces. Kortez felt the thing that had identified itself as the Shift whisper through his consciousness, eager to see the intruder through a material pair of eyes.

Homunculette nudged the intruder's body with the tip of a dirt-encrusted shoe. The intruder obligingly rolled onto his back, and everyone leaned forward to peer at his face. Except for Lieutenant Bregman, of course, who was busy being sick in the corner.

The face was striking, but hardly remarkable. Long features, smooth skin, a high forehead. The man's eyes were closed, but somehow he still managed to look gently bemused.

The mantra froze on the Colonel's lips.

What had General Tchike told him?

What had he been told about the mission?

The other representatives started arguing again. The Time Lord was yelling insults at Mr Qixotl, who was simultaneously panicking and reassuring his guests that there was no cause for panic. But Kortez was already several kilometres above them, extending his spirit until it touched the roof of the world, just as his chiefs at the Goa Institute of Military Spirituality had taught him.

Rising above proceedings. Moving out of reach of the noise. Remembering.

UNISYC'S STORY

Arizona, Earth, March 2069

We're standing in a desert that used to be a county. We're on the edge of a crater, although it takes us a while to figure that out; we're not used to seeing holes this big. The camera moves, sweeping across the landscape until we can make out the size of the pit. It's enormous, kilometres from side to side, the floor carpeted with dry bones, crushed metal, and shattered concrete.

It's the Phoenix Sandbowl. The state's most famous city used to stand here, but of course, there hasn't been anything worth seeing since the Wars of Independence. Most of Phoenix vanished in less than a minute, *they* say. The people living on the outskirts moved out after that, as their homes began to slide and sink into the Sandbowl. Nobody's quite sure why the city was taken out, even today. *They* say it was a Tesla bomb, planted in the city foundations by terrorists from the breakaway Southern states, but no one's ever been able to explain why they'd want to get rid of a city all the way out in Arizona. Besides, who cares what *they* say?

So we keep turning, taking in all the little motor-home villages in the desert around us, the camps where the descendants of the city's refugees have been living since '37. There are trailer parks as far as the eye can see, battleship-sized caravans built to house hundreds, their wheels rusting away and sinking into the dust. But it's not the vehicles we're interested in. The camera is zooming in, auto-focusing on a patch of empty white sand off on the horizon.

There aren't any caravans there. All the people have been moved away. The area's blocked off by "extreme force" cordons, great screens of transparent plastic wired to miniature plasma generators. The only vehicles inside the cordon are government vehicles. You can tell they're government vehicles, because they don't have registration plates.

The camera goes to maximum magnification. We see people inside the enclosure, mostly men, dressed in heavy black suits despite the Arizona heat. Most of them are wearing shades, even though the fashion this year is for self-polarising contact lenses (everybody knows that).

There's something in the centre of the enclosure, surrounded by vehicles on all sides. Something the men-in-black are guarding. Something they don't want us to see.

Geneva, Earth, April 2069

'It's a hole in the ground,' said General Tchike. 'We took a satellite picture, before the Americans shot down the last RetCon probe. We think it's an impact crater. A pinprick, next to the Sandbowl.'

He slid his fingers across the contact panel, and the picture froze on the cinevid screen. The screen was a holograph, so the image hovered above the surface of the table at the dead centre of the War Room. The cinevid's controls were set into the arm of the General's chair, and you had to open a secret compartment to get at them. Childish, thought Tchike. He wondered if the technical staff were still fitting ejector seats in UNISYC staff cars.

There were five individuals at the table, the minimum number required for any UNISYC Conclave. It was a Zodiac Level meeting, 60-L clearance and above, so there were none of the usual secretaries or security guards in attendance. The War Room looked empty without them. Bleak. The walls were sheer black, which didn't help, the only decoration being the old UN insignia stamped across the tabletop. The UN was a joke, and had been ever since Whiteacre had signed the World Zones Accord in '38, but UNISYC still liked to pretend it took its mother organisation seriously.

'Government agents,' said Brigadier Renault, with a nod towards the frozen men-in-black on the screen. 'Dinner suits and dark glasses. The usual dress code.'

'Protecting a hole in the ground?' queried Dr Martinique.

Renault turned his swivel-chair towards Tchike. 'I assume we're not just talking about a meteorite strike here, General.'

'Skydrop Scenario Four,' Tchike replied. 'Whatever hit the ground was artificial. Alien. Our sources tell us it landed near the Phoenix Sandbowl on March 26th, at around 11:30. This footage was taken on the 27th, using an MI7 microcamera.' His hand moved back to the contact panel. 'There's more, of course.'

So we're back in the desert, but the picture's wobbling. The cameraman is running, darting between apartment-sized mobile homes with portable suncatcher generators strapped to their rooftops. When the camera stops shaking, we see a trailer caravan in front of us, its door broken off its hinges. Two of the men-in-black stand outside, pinioning a third individual between them. The victim is male, in his thirties, with grease-coloured hair hanging down to his waist, his face covered in stubble and sticking plasters. Trailer trash, then. One of the thousands who made it out of the Phoenix suburbs before they slid into the dust. He's yelling something as the men-in-black grab his arms, but we don't hear any sound.

Now one of his assailants looks up, towards the camera. Suddenly, everything goes white. We realise the cameraman has ducked behind something, although we can't tell what. The next thing we know, there's a flurry of movement. We feel like we're twining again. This time, we suspect we're being followed.

Tchike stopped the cinevid footage.

'The alien object hit the ground in the middle of a trailer community,' he explained. 'No known casualties. Obviously, the authorities took the usual precautions.'

'Witness intimidation,' noted Major-General Bael.

'I've got a question,' said Professor Cogan.

Everybody swivelled in his direction. Cogan hadn't said a word up until now. The man was English, and therefore naturally reserved. Or, to put it another way; no one cared what he had to say, most of the time.

'Who took this footage?' Cogan asked.

'One of our people. Colonel Kortez. Working undercover in Arizona.'

There was a long, drawn-out groan from Dr Martinique.

'Is there a problem, Doctor?' asked the General.

Martinique crossed her arms, and turned down the corners of her mouth. 'Kortez is insane,' she said. 'I worked with him in Ontario. His idea of "undercover" is to dress up like a native American and go around asking people if they're what they seem. We should have put him in a home years ago.'

She shot an accusing glance at Bael, and Tchike was glad to see the Major-General squirm in his seat. It was easy to dislike Bael, whether he did his job well or not. The man had a nasty little beard, a nasty little gnome's mouth, and two nasty little piggy eyes. He never did anything wrong, as such, but Tchike always got the feeling he was on the brink of doing something deeply irritating. His uniform didn't suit him, either. He looked like he'd be happy working as a game-show host, not handling personnel and recruitment for a paramilitary organisation. Even one as run-down as UNISYC.

'Don't start on me,' Bael announced, in his slithery New Zealand accent. 'Kortez was the best man we had ready. Look, I don't have to tell anyone here how short we are on manpower. We don't have people queueing up to kick the crap out of Cybermen any more. If we hadn't cut half the NCO ranks out of the organisation, we'd have more officers than ground agents by now. Half of our lieutenants aren't qualified for officer duty, d'you know that? They've just stuck at the job long enough to prove they're not completely brain-dead.'

Martinique looked unconvinced. 'You're seriously telling me you couldn't find anyone saner than Kortez?'

'This is besides the point,' Tchike rumbled. 'I want your opinions on the footage, not on the cameraman. Watch.'

A cut. A splice.

We're not in the desert any more. We're in a hangar, probably at an airbase, judging by the military paint-job. Oh, you know the kind of place. You've seen the movies, you've heard the

rumours, you've watched *Ed Bogeley's Conspiracy Hour* on Channel 101. According to the folk stories, whenever an alien ship crashes on Earth, the soldiers turn up and drag the wreckage off to a hangar like this. It's traditional.

Let's concentrate on the things around us. In the distance, on the other side of the hangar, men are working on a piece of serious high-tech machinery, but it's only a helicopter. Probably fitted with whatever weaponry's fashionable this season – last year it was viral missiles, the year before that it was psyche-guided warheads, you know the drill – but it's definitely man-made. No UFOs here.

There are other shapes in the hall, though. Some the size of cars, some the size of tea chests, lined up in neat rows from here to the far wall. We can't see what they are, because they're all covered with the obligatory green military tarpaulin. The cameraman sneaks from item to item, sheltering behind the material whenever a technician looks his way.

There are tags on the objects, little grey plastic tags, tied to the corners of the tarp. We watch the cameraman's hand reach for one. He turns it over between his fingers, reads the tiny digital numbers. Obviously, this isn't what he's looking for, because he moves on.

'My God,' hissed Brigadier Renault.

Tchike froze the footage. Renault was goggling at the cinevid as if he'd just seen the face of Jesus Christ inside a pomegranate. Still, Renault did have a tendency to overreact. The Brigadier was Canadian, with the kind of attractive-yet-boring features that'd look good in a Hollywood action movie. Evidently, Renault had noticed this himself, because he tried to make every word he uttered sound interesting and dramatic. The man was an experienced field agent, though, and he'd spent a good few years working for UNISYC in North America, so he'd seemed like a good choice to attend the Conclave.

'That's the Toy Store,' Renault went on, still looking for Oscar nominations. 'It's the same as the footage the *Hourly Telepress* smuggled out in '54.'

As usual, Dr Martinique looked dubious. 'I always thought the *Telepress* story was a joke.'

Professor Cogan raised his hand. Typical English, thought Tchike. He looked like he wanted to leave the room. 'I'm sorry, I don't... what's the Toy Store?'

'It's where the Americans keep all their little alien keepsakes,' explained Martinique. 'They used to have a hangar in New Mexico, but they moved it to Los Angeles after the States fell apart.'

Renault was nodding. 'So Kortez made it into the Toy Store. I'm impressed.'

If only, thought Tchike. 'What you're seeing isn't the Toy Store proper, Brigadier. The Toy Store is impenetrable. Protected by commandeered alien technology. If it weren't, we'd have taken it by now. This hangar is a clearing house. Even with inside help, we can't get any further in than this. Neither could the *Telepress*.'

'Then we've got someone working inside the American organisation?'

There was a murmur around the table. Back in the days of the UN, Tchike remembered, UNIT had entered negotiations with North America to try to get a look at its alien relics. Of course, when UNIT had been superseded by UNISYC and the United States had ceased to be United, the talks had broken down. There was no diplomatic link between the power blocs now, just nonstop subterfuge. And, to be honest, Tchike preferred it that way.

UNIT had been soft. UNIT had been weak. That was why the organisation had fallen, and that was why the militant wing of the UN's "Security Yard" had risen to take its place.

Tchike tried not to consider the fact that UNISYC was going the same way as its predecessor. He started the footage again, leaving Renault's question unanswered, and fast-wound through the boring bits.

The cameraman reaches out again, touching another one of the tags. The number matches the one he's been given by his contact – we're reading between the lines here, naturally – so he sticks his head up over the top of the tarpaulin, to make sure none of the helicopter technicians are watching. They aren't.

Slowly, carefully, he lifts the fabric. Underneath, something is glowing.

It's a box. A casket. The same size as the average coffin, from what we can see of it. It seems to be made out of metal, though the footage isn't clear enough to show us the surface in detail.

The box is throbbing, pulsing, and the light's causing interference lines across the cinevid. This, we know, is the object that fell out of the sky near the Phoenix Sandbowl.

The camera jerks, swings around. We see smudges of white, smudges of grey. People. Moving. Technicians are pointing, figures are flooding out of darkened doorways on the other side of the hangar.

The cameraman turns and runs.

Tchike turned to Cogan. 'Professor? Your department, I think.'

Cogan practically jumped as he became the centre of attention. He addressed the other three, not Tchike himself. 'Ahh... well. The Colonel was supplied with, ah, with both general and specific monitoring equipment, in addition to the camera. The readings were, were, were passed to me by the General a few days ago. I've had my people take a look at them. A good took. Ahem.'

'And?' Tchike prompted. Cogan was young for a man in his position, not much over thirty; with big stupid blue eyes and a floppy blond fringe, but he seemed to be practising to be an old English eccentric already. He'd be wearing wire-framed glasses next, the General decided.

Cogan cleared his throat. 'Well. Well. Yes. We've found some very unusual things. Tachyon traces, for a start. Quite extreme tachyon traces.'

'Tachyons?' Dr Martinique looked startled, much to Tchike's amusement. 'Are you suggesting that box is a time machine?'

'Ahh, no. The scan didn't pick up any signs of, of, of internal technology. It seems to be exactly what it, ah, seems to be. A box. Not a vehicle of any kind.'

'An escape pod?' suggested Renault.

Cogan nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes. Yes. I mean, I should think. But if it's an escape pod, its chronometry... that is, it doesn't seem contemporaneous with... what I'm saying is, I think it travelled through time to get here. And there are traces of Silverberg energy. Very, very surprising. Yes.'

Martinique leaned back in her swivel chair, and laughed. 'Silverberg energy. Signs of psychic activity. Fringe science, Professor.'

'No, no, it's true,' flustered Cogan. 'In which case, the pod may not have needed navigational systems. It may have been guided by... well, by the mind of... of whoever was inside it. The same principle as a psyche-guided missile, but navigating through four dimensions. Very complex. Very complex.'

Tchike shifted his weight from one buttock to the other. The notion of time travel disturbed him. He had personal reasons for that, of course. Five years ago, he'd erased all the official records of the Doctor's existence from the UN files. These days, nobody below the rank of Brigadier even knew the old interferer existed. The Time Lords were mentioned in *The Eye-Spy Book of Alien Monsters*, but that was all.

'You see our problem, then?' the General said, addressing the rest of the Conclave. 'We have every reason to think the pod was occupied when it crashed. Now watch this.'

We're seeing the walls of the hangar zip past. We're seeing everything in flashes of khaki and gun-metal grey. A figure in sunglasses moves out in front of us, but the cameraman's fist jumps into the frame, and cracks the man-in-black across the jaw before he can finish drawing his gun.

And we notice something else. The camera doesn't stop moving, so we only see it for a split-second, but it's there, no doubt about it. As we lurch towards the exit, we pass an open doorway, the entrance to a side-chamber. We glimpse the people at the threshold, looking up at the camera with surprised looks on their faces.

They're dressed differently to the other personnel here. Not men-in-black, not technicians. They wear coveralls, so they look more like sanitation workers than anything else. There are four of them, and between them they carry a stretcher.

On the stretcher is a bag, a chrysalis of transparent plastic, sealed, tagged, and air-proofed. Inside the bag is a body.

The camera spins. The picture freezes.

There was a long silence.

'What happened to Kortez?' asked Martinique, finally. 'I mean, I'm assuming he didn't get out alive.'

Tchike laughed. Or at least, he grunted, which was as close to a laugh as he ever came. 'Obviously he got out alive, Doctor. Or we wouldn't be sitting here watching this. Would we?'

Martinique looked cynical. But then, she always did. She was on the brink of being an old woman these days, her hair the colour of steel wire, her suit making her look more like a company director than a xenobiologist. 'He got out? From that place? With all those MIBs around?'

'I'm not at liberty to discuss the Colonel's tactics, Doctor. If you feel your security clearance isn't good enough, you'll have to take the matter up with the Marshal.'

'You mean, he *did* have inside help?'

General Tchike growled at her. 'Dr Martinique, you're here as a consultant on extraterrestrial concerns. I'd hoped you'd be more interested in the body than in UNISYC's American connections.'

Martinique sighed. 'What do you want me to say? Presumably, it came out of that casket. But it's a corpse, I can't see what use it'll be to the Americans. It's not going to be telling them any secrets, is it?'

Tchike grinned his most hostile grin, and reached into the top pocket of his uniform jacket. 'No? Then you don't believe the alien's DNA might be of value, for example?'

'Well... if you're a research scientist, maybe.' Martinique narrowed her eyes. 'Why? What do you know?'

'I know, Doctor, exactly what that alien is. And I know exactly what it represents. Shortly after Kortez returned to Geneva, we received this. I found it on my desk. Nobody knows how it got there.'

Tchike drew the card out of his pocket. Even in the dim light of the War Room, it sparkled. The same way the casket in the cinevid had sparkled.

'An invitation,' he said, before anyone could ask. 'This card tells us the exact nature of the body in the Colonel's film. It doesn't give us a name, but it gives us enough clues. And it tells us how we can get our hands on it, even though the Americans have moved it to the Toy Store. What I want to know is, what kind of creature would send us something like this?'

4

DEATH, DEATH, AND — GOOD GRIEF — MORE DEATH

The hall was full of dead people, although the Doctor wasn't sure if they knew they were dead. They certainly didn't seem too perky, anyway. They were pale, even the ones who hadn't been white while they'd been alive, and their clothes had been worn down to nothing, bleached of all humanity by Time, Motion, and the sundry other forces governing this part of the universe.

One of the dead men shuffled up to the Doctor, and kicked him over with the toe of his boot. The Doctor rolled onto his back. He couldn't see the walls of the chamber, not from down here on the floor. The edges of the room were in shadow, and he was sure the corners were shifting around of their own accord, defying all the known laws of architecture while they knew nobody could see them. Ominous shapes hovered just outside his field of vision, their faces concealed by the darkness. The Doctor squinted, tried to bring them into focus, but all he could make out were the silhouettes of high collars and black robes.

The darkness, he realised, was what the shapes had instead of fashion sense. They had to remain unseen. If they were seen, they'd be real, and if they were real, they'd lose their power. The dead were their slaves, the ones who moved in the light while the puppet-masters slithered around in the corners.

The whole scenario was familiar. The Doctor wondered if it was all a memory, dredged up from one of his past lives. Or even...

'Oh, no,' he said. 'Don't tell me it's a premonition.'

'Is he human?' inquired a voice from the back of the hall.

The slave, the puppet, the dead man, looked down his nose at the Doctor. He was Caucasian, his skin tinged a nasty green. Not Martian green, just nausea green. His hair was slicked back, yet somehow messy at the same time. Space-time anomalies I can deal with, the Doctor told himself, but paradoxical hairstyles?

'I told you,' the dead man said. His voice made the Doctor think of dying slugs. 'The security in this place is a mess.'

'It's all right,' the Doctor told him.

The dead man looked alarmed. 'What?'

'It's all right. I know how you feel. I was a slave, too.' He had no idea why he'd said that, but it seemed to fit the situation.

The dead man turned, towards the shadowy figures in the shadowy corners. 'He's mad. What did you do to him?'

'Nothing. He passed out as soon as I took him on board myself. If he's that sensitive to my secure array, he must be time-aware.' The voice was female. Steady. The Doctor noted more than forty small details in the enunciation that gave the voice away as synthetic.

A sigh from the darkness. 'Let's all calm down a moment here, yeah? Security's fine, Mr H, everything's on the level. Just a little bit of a misunderstanding, OK?'

'You're saying this idiot's another one of your bidders?' The dead man made a sickly coughing noise that sounded a bit like "hah". 'How many more surprises have you got lined up for us, Qixotl?'

'Look, I think what's happening here is, we're all getting a bit tensed up. Right? We need to sit back for a while and, y'know, take stock.' The Doctor concentrated on the voice. It came from one of the shadowy figures, but...

He sat bolt upright. The dead man jumped back, a look of sheer panic splattering itself across his features.

'I'm not here!' the Doctor shouted.

Five pairs of eyes blinked at him. At least one of them, he guessed, was artificial.

'I mean, I'm not where I thought I was,' the Doctor explained. 'Some form of hallucination, probably. I'm sorry, I thought you were all timeless beings of unlimited evil, and I'd come here to

defeat you.'

There was a stony silence. The Doctor had a good look around. The chamber was small-ish, certainly not the grand hall he'd imagined. The walls were made out of ersatz stone, but there was an incongruous cocktail bar stuck in one corner. The leather chairs didn't exactly fit the style of the place, either.

There were eight other life-forms in the room. Two were human, wearing contemporary military uniforms. UNISYC insignia on their breast pockets, the Doctor noted. Then there were the Paradox cultists he'd seen earlier. The fifth individual was the woman who'd accosted him in the corridor, the one whose face had opened up and swallowed him, and yes, he'd have to think about the ramifications of that at some point. Next to her was a rumpled little man who looked like he wanted to be somewhere else. The Doctor got the impression he'd wanted to be somewhere else ever since he'd been born.

Then there was the dead man. Now the Doctor was seeing things a little more clearly, the man seemed much healthier than he had done. He still looked a bit under the weather, and he still smelled like he'd washed in eau de chemical spillage, but other than that, he could almost have been human.

The Doctor held out his hand. 'I apologise. You're alive after all. My mistake.' The man took another step back, and shot a nervous glance at the woman with the unfolding head. The Doctor retracted his hand, then struggled to his feet, making a big song and dance out of the movement. Giving himself time to think. "Bidders", the man in the smelly suit had said. "Bidders". These people had all been invited here, presumably by the nervous-looking individual. Therefore...

'I'm here for the auction,' he announced. There was a long silence. Those assembled in the room stared at him blankly. The Doctor crossed a couple of metaphorical fingers.

Then all eyes turned on the nervous man. He squirmed accordingly.

Qixotl. That was the name the not-actually-dead man had used. The Doctor strode forward, his hand outstretched. 'You must be Mr Qixotl. Nice to meet you, at last. I've been looking forward to this for, oh, ages, I should think.'

Another tense moment. Then Qixotl took his hand. The Doctor wasn't sure, but he thought he felt a degree of relief in Qixotl's shake. 'Yeah, hi. Glad you could, y'know. Make it.'

The bigger-on-the-inside woman spoke again. 'Explain. If he's invited, why doesn't he have an invitation?'

The Doctor and Qixotl exchanged glances. 'Oh, mine must have got lost in the post,' the Doctor blathered. He had no idea why Qixotl was going along with the bluff, but he wasn't going to argue the point. He cast his eyes around the room, looking for an excuse to derail the conversation, and his gaze settled on one of the humans, the man in the UNISYC outfit with the officer's stripes on his shoulder. 'Sergeant... *Colonel* Kortezi!' the Doctor exclaimed. 'So good to see a familiar face. Still reading up on the Zen Buddhism?'

The Colonel looked startled. By his side, the other human shuffled her feet. 'You know me?'

The Doctor bobbed his head. 'Of course, you wouldn't remember. I've changed so much since the last time we met. I'm the D-'

'Er, right, yeah,' coughed Qixotl. He kept clearing his throat, loudly, until he was sure the Doctor wasn't going to say any more. 'We should have some kind of social event, get everyone introduced properly, yeah? Maybe a nice get-together up in the roof garden or something. In the meantime, why don't we all go back to our rooms and get a bit of rest? Only one more party to get here before we can start the bidding, and then, y'know...'

'There was one party to come before *he* arrived,' the nonorganic woman pointed out, nodding towards the Doctor.

'Uh-huh. Right. Well, I might have miscounted. Anyway, the point I'm making is, I think we're all a teensy bit on edge, and we need to... oh, no.'

The Doctor turned to see what Qixotl was gaping at. A familiar shape had appeared in the doorway, and was staring at the individuals gathered in the room, obviously not knowing whether to say hello or make a run for it.

"Eep", went Sam's wristwatch.

The Doctor coughed, politely. 'This is my travelling companion, Miss Jones of London. Sam, come in. We were all getting acquainted. Almost.'

Sam looked as if he'd just told her he was going out to have dinner with Mr and Mrs Drashig. When she raised her hand, in greeting, she looked like she was on the verge of holding up the other hand and surrendering.

'Hi,' she said, weakly. 'Look, I'm sorry, I'm totally lost here. What's going on. Do-?'

'Well, anyway,' said Mr Qixotl. He practically shouted it, desperate to stop Sam finishing the sentence. The Doctor shot him a puzzled look.

Almost imperceptibly, Qixotl shook his head. A gesture that said: not now. Talk later. Alone.

And in that one moment of contact, there was a kind of understanding. A split-second of recognition. Technically, the Doctor knew, Time Lords weren't supposed to be able to recognise each other after they'd regenerated. But it happened, all the same. No matter how much your face changed, there'd be something left over, something too subtle to put your finger on. That was what he felt now. Not that he was sure Qixotl was another Time Lord, but he knew, one way or another, they weren't exactly strangers.

Qixotl looked away, and forced a smile between his lips. 'Well, anyway,' he repeated. 'Time for a quick recess before things get into full swing, OK? Good.'

The Doctor glanced around the room. The others were muttering among themselves, looking slightly thrown. He spotted the Amazon woman slipping out through the doorway. So smooth, no one else had even noticed her going.

'I'd like to know one thing,' said the female Paradox cultist. Her voice was soft. Curious, rather than threatening. In the same way vivisectionists are "curious", the Doctor mused. 'Who, precisely, does this agent represent?'

'Me? Oh, I'm independent.' The Doctor slapped his head. 'Of course! I knew I was missing something.'

All eyes were on him again. 'Eight people,' the Doctor went on. 'I noticed eight people when I woke up, but I only counted seven. Who did I miss?'

There was a long pause. The Doctor looked around, but the faces of the other "bidders" were blank. Finally, he found the answer to his question written in the cracks of the nearest wall.

YOU'RE VERY PERCEPTIVE, read the cracks. MOST PEOPLE WOULDN'T EVEN HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED MY EXISTENCE.

'Erm, have you met Mr Shift?' murmured Qixotl. He sounded almost embarrassed.

Somewhere in her consciousness, Marie had entire subsystems devoted to interpersonal dynamics. Vast neural canyons, full of raw psychology and unprocessed information. The systems hadn't ever been used. At least, not to their full potential. Marie had been brought into being after the start of the war (brought into being, not actually constructed; 103 TARDIS units were designed to reproduce in a manner that was almost organic), and in wartime, social engineering wasn't really a priority. The psychological systems were so finely honed that, at 100 per cent efficiency, they could predict every thought in organic minds with a margin of error of less than 1.3 millifreuds.

Here in the ziggurat, of course, the ability would have been useless. The Shift was a non-organic, impossible to predict. Trask was a post-organic, his motives unclear, though Marie had her suspicions about where his loyalties lay. The minds of the humans were easy to fathom, in themselves, but exposed to so many unpredictable elements, there was no way of knowing for sure which way they might jump.

And now there was the intruder. Marie had scanned his body when he'd been inside her secure array, she'd run the usual genetic and morphic tests. The newcomer was a Time Lord, his biodata too complex to unravel without a deeper scan. Another non-linear influence. And Qixotl had stopped the stranger identifying himself, his social manipulations had been obvious even to Marie's decaying personal protocols. She'd have to talk this through with Homunculette at some point.

Briefly, Marie wondered whether it was worth learning how to sigh convincingly. She was sure it was what an organic would have done at this stage.

She stopped at a junction, halfway along the main corridor of the ziggurat. At the back of her mind – at the back of the *organic* part of her mind, the part that existed in simple fourdimensional space, the part that acted as a real-world anchor for the rest of her body – something shifted to

one side, moved like a rocker switch.

Her deep-level sensory systems had been activated. Senses buried close to her power core were reaching up through the interior dimensions, up towards her skin. Feelers ripped open the soft non-matter between the outer shell and the inner body, tearing at the physical connections of Marie's forebrain. Things too large and subtle to manifest themselves in the material world tried to force their way along a conduit the width of her spinal column.

A moment of confusion. Marie hadn't activated the deep senses, not consciously. She wondered if there'd been some kind of system fault, the sort of hitch the organic part of her brain couldn't get a fix on. Or had she given the activation order without knowing it? If so, the instinct could only have come from the lower reaches of her body, from the depths of the artron engines, or the buried reflexes of the fluid links.

She ordered the deep senses to deactivate. Wait until we're outside, she told them. Not here. Too much interference in the ziggurat, feedback from the block transfer material. The information would be blinding, deafening, more than her surface mind would be able to process.

But her systems refused to listen. Marie felt the shell of her body opening up. New impulses, new responses.

- Qixotl was covering something up.
- There was another Time Lord in the ziggurat.
- She knew who Trask was working for.
- She knew who the Shift was working for.

These were the thoughts the deep senses were responding to. Not her conscious commands. The rest of her body, the rest of the ship, was trying to unravel the secrets of the Unthinkable City, the codes of logic that governed the movements of Qixotl's other guests. She felt like a tiny head on a bloated body. A mass of data with a humanoid face.

This was paranoia, then. This was panic. Marie unfolded, the interior structures of the TARDIS wanting – demanding – to be set free. She felt her arms unravel, revealing weapons systems the size of small moons. Targeting mechanisms, operating on the universe's most complex dimensional levels, began searching the area for suitable victims.

There was something outside. Outside the ziggurat, beyond the material layers of this planet. Waiting for all the delegates to assemble, waiting for the pieces to fall into place. It was a trap, it was all a trap, and very soon the trap would be sprung. Was Qixotl part of it? Was the other Time Lord?

Random particles of matter were thrown up out of Marie's power core, manifesting themselves as droplets of hard sweat on her skin. A million artificial eyes sprang loose in her spinal column, stared out of her body, and went blind. The targeting mechanisms strained inside her arms, then tore through her flesh, desperately probing the world outside. Determined to pin down the threat. Finding nothing.

There was the echo of an explosion. Then came the explosion itself. Then absolute silence.

Mr Qixotl didn't even flinch. He'd felt the after-shock before the blast. As if the detonation had been so important, it had announced its coming long before it had actually arrived.

It was Homunculette who broke the silence. His eyes were bulging out of his skull, now. 'We're under attack,' he hissed.

Mr Qixotl swallowed. 'It was nothing, Mr H. Really, it was nothing. Maybe one of the matter augmentors backfiring, yeah?'

'Would that represent any real threat to our safety?' asked Cousin Justine. Her voice was calm and quiet, so everybody ignored her.

'You think I don't know what an attack sounds like?' Homunculette shrieked. 'That was some kind of plasma burst, or... I don't know...'

'Dimensional incursion,' said the individual Qixotl knew full well had to be the Doctor.

Homunculette spun around to face him. 'What?'

'You heard the echo. A minor rupture in local space-time, I'd say.' The Doctor shrugged. 'Not that I'm claiming to be an expert.'

Homunculette was practically boggling his face off. 'Dimensional incursion? What kind of ludicrous technobabble is that supposed to –'

Unexpectedly, he fell silent.

'Marie,' he gargled. And suddenly, he was at the doorway, having bounded across the room with a single step.

Qixotl gave a sheepish grin, and made sure everybody in the room got to see it. 'Technical hitch,' he told the reps. Then he followed Homunculette out into the passageway.

Homunculette found Marie's body in the main corridor, at the junction between the guest room passage and the ziggurat entrance. He didn't recognise it as a body, to begin with. The first thing he saw was the hatstand, propped up against the wall between the torches. After that, he saw the tiles, patches of off-white flooring torn out of the TARDIS interior and scattered along the corridor. A sofa clogged up the side-passage to Homunculette's right; he identified it as the shabby red one from Marie's secondary console room, but only half of it seemed to be there, the other being embedded in the corridor wall. An upturned bookcase lay beyond the sofa, vomiting out shredded pages covered in scrawls of High Gallifreyan.

Marie was

she was lying there. Not an object

Marie – the dead heart of Marie – lay at the centre of the junction, her spine pressed against the floor, her head tilted at an angle that made her look as though she'd broken her neck. The entire left side of her body was missing. It was as if someone had drawn a line, a smooth contour, from her cheek to her ankle, and torn away everything on one side of it. Her left arm was gone. So was a lot of her face.

She was a person

his companion

she was his dead

Marie's right eye was intact. The left eye was in place, but the skin had been torn away, leaving a pearl of pure black that didn't even bother pretending it was organic. A thing, instead of an organ. An object.

She was

she was not an object. She was a person. She was

she was his companion. His dead

he was bending over her, knees pressing against the broken tiles, the fabric of his suit soaking up cold liquid from the floor. Water. Pooling around her body. Sucked out of the purification system that had been part of

dead companion

and there were footsteps, wet footsteps. Mr Qixotl, the humans, the man in the ridiculous velvet jacket, and

He looked into her eyes, tried to look into her eyes, found himself staring into her head instead. Nothing but static inside her

and Mr Qixotl was leaning over his shoulder, gawping at the wound in Marie's side, standing in her lifeblood, her water supply, without even an apology. The man in the velvet jacket was hovering behind him. Spectators. Vultures. Homunculette reached out for Marie, wanting to press his hand against her cheek, but his arm slipped into the wound and vanished into her interior. Homunculette looked up, and met Qixotl's stupid frog-eyed stare.

'You – *promised* – *security*,' he said. His voice was a long, strangled gurgle. Qixotl looked scared, started to back away. Homunculette stood, felt the urge to stand up and hit the man, to crack his head against the wall and keep cracking until the wound was as big as Marie's.

'She's a TARDIS,' said the curly-haired man. He was staring into Marie's body, transfixed. Surprised.

Alien vulture. It felt almost like a violation, like the man was unravelling every mystery of Homunculette's companion.

Curly-hair jumped back, as a filing cabinet squeezed itself out of Marie's wound and shunted itself across the corridor. The matter left inside her was forcing its way out, piece by piece. Pus from the wound.

'She was attacked,' Homunculette said. He knew there was some kind of feeling in his voice, but he didn't know what it was supposed to be.

Curly-hair looked up at him. 'Maybe not. I'm sorry, I know you're upset. But this doesn't look like an attack from the outside. I don't know of any weapon that could cause an incursion like this. It looks like the damage was done by something internal.' He looked down at Marie again. 'Did... Marie... have weapons systems? Defences?'

'She was my companion,' Homunculette whined. 'Of course she had weapons systems.'

The man nodded. 'I think something triggered them. Altered them in some way. Her own weapons took her apart from the inside.'

'Erm, right.' Mr Qixotl's voice. Even his words sounded like they were trying to sneak away. 'Maybe we should think this through a bit more, y'know, carefully...'

Homunculette closed his eyes. 'Get her back to our room,' he said. He felt fluid trickling down his fingers, and knew it was blood. He'd been clenching his fists, scraping open his skin with his nails. When he opened his eyes again, the curly-haired man was still examining Marie, a gormless expression on his stupid alien face.

'A TARDIS,' he muttered. 'Well well well.'

Another poxy corridor, thought Sam. Great.

After the explosion, things had quietened down a bit. According to the Doctor, they'd stumbled across some kind of alien auction, arranged by the impossibly shifty Mr Qixotl, although nobody had bothered telling Sam what was up for grabs here. Qixotl was supposed to be a scheming interplanetary mastermind, but to Sam he'd looked and sounded more like a reject from *Only Fools and Horses*. Things weren't going well for him, obviously, as the Doctor had gatecrashed the party and one of the other clients had spontaneously self-destructed in the middle of the ziggurat.

'But that's not the worst thing,' the Doctor had told Sam, after Qixotl had helped the woman's companion carry off her body. Her body had consisted not just of an actual corpse, but several pieces of furniture, as well. 'She wasn't human. She wasn't even organic. She was a TARDIS.'

'A... hold on. You're winding me up.'

'I told you before. A fully-functioning TARDIS can look like anything. A motorbike, an Ionic column –'

'– a sedan chair. Yeah, you've given me the lecture. When you said "anything", I didn't know you meant *anything* anything. I didn't know you meant *people* anything.'

'That's because our TARDIS isn't advanced enough to have a fully-developed personality matrix. Marie – that was her name, by the way – must have been much more complex.'

Sam hadn't commented on the way the Doctor had said "our" TARDIS instead of "my" TARDIS. Touching, that. 'You mean, she was a newer model?'

'Very new. So new, in fact, she doesn't even exist yet.'

Sam had blinked. 'Sorry, is this a weirdzo time travel thing I'm missing the point of?'

'The future, Sam. We Time Lords can't investigate the future of our race. We're like the oracles of ancient Greece, really. We can prophesy everything except our own destinies. Mr Homunculette is a Time Lord, one from an era in Gallifrey's future. How far in the future, I'm not sure.'

'Is that bad?'

'Bad?' The Doctor had looked as though she'd suggested eating live anacondas. 'It could be disastrous. If I learn anything about future Gallifreyan history, causality could be damaged beyond all conception. Even by being here, I'm breaking one of the major laws of Time. I forget which Law it is, exactly. It could be the Third.'

'Terrif,' Sam had said.

After that, the Doctor had stormed off, in the direction of the guest rooms. He'd said he wanted to talk with Mr Qixoti, though he hadn't said why. Sam had been left to wander the corridors alone. According to the Doctor, the place was quite safe, and Qixotl had made sure there were all the comforts an organic life-form could ask for. Sam hadn't bothered pointing out that the place was nonetheless an enormous torchlit pyramid in which one guest had already bitten the dust. Comfort wasn't really an issue.

She stopped at an L-shaped turning. She'd been following a single twisted passageway around the ziggurat, and she guessed she'd very nearly come full circle. She only stopped because she saw movement up ahead. A spot of light. Like the torchlight, only smaller, not as bright.

Sam crept towards the glow, sticking to the shadows whenever she could. Whatever the Doctor

had said about diplomacy, she really didn't want to run into either of the bat-skulls again. She got the feeling they were the kind of people who'd been first in line to cut up the frogs in biology class.

As she got closer, she realised the glow was the end of a lit cigarette.

There was an alcove to the left of the passage, a stairway up to the next level. Sitting on the bottom step, cigarette in hand, was the skinny dark-haired woman Sam had seen in the cocktail lounge. Then, she'd looked nervous; now, she looked shattered, the sweat stains practically welding her shirt to her skin.

The woman looked up. She would have been attractive, if her face hadn't been covered in blue sleep lines and her hair hadn't been drooping over her eyes in sticky black tentacles. Sam raised her hands.

'It's OK,' she said. 'Two arms, two legs, one head. I'm safe. Honest.'

The woman laughed. The laugh turned into a cough. She dropped the cigarette, and stubbed it out with her boot.

'Don't know if they've got any ashtrays around here,' she said. 'You're human, aren't you? I mean, really human.'

Sam nodded. 'OK if I join you?'

The woman shifted to one side. Sam plonked herself down on the step next to her. 'Thanks. Been having a look around this place. Feet are starting to kill me.'

'Uh,' said the woman.

Sam held out her hand. She wasn't exactly sure why she was trying to strike up a conversation like this. Maybe it was a typical human reaction, when there were so many aliens wandering around the place. All those of like genes ended up sticking together, in the end. God, there was nothing like intergalactic travel to bring out the bigot in you, was there? 'Samantha. Sam. Sam Jones.'

The woman mulled over the hand for a moment or two, then shook it. 'Bregman. Lieutenant Bregman. UNISYC. Uh. In the interests of good civilian relations, maybe you should call me Kathleen or something.' Sam had no idea what UNISYC was, but she nodded anyway. 'You're with the "independent"?''

'What? Oh. You mean, the Doctor.'

'Yeah. Him. He's not one of us, is he?'

Sam tried to get a fix on Kathleen's accent. It sounded vaguely English, but a particularly distorted and Americanised kind of English. With a hint of French, maybe. 'One of who?'

'Us. You know.' Kathleen half-shrugged. 'What I mean is, you're not working for any of the powerblocs on *this* planet. You're not here on behalf of Earth. Am I close?'

Good question, thought Sam. 'I think we're supposed to be non-political. I keep trying to get the Doctor to go Marxist on me, but he won't do it. How do you know he's not human, anyway?'

'Christ knows. Instinct, maybe. All you have to do is get close to them, and you can tell. No one ever tells you stuff like that, do they?'

"Them" meaning "aliens", Sam presumed. 'D'you meet a lot of them in your, er, line of work?' she asked.

Kathleen reached into her backpack, which she'd taken off and rested on the floor between her legs. 'Me personally? Nope. This is my first time in active BEM service. They've never let me near the Bugs before. I think I'm starting to figure out why. This must be that "culture shock" thing I keep hearing about.'

'Everyone gets that,' Sam told her, nodding sympathetically. But she was thinking about her first meeting with the Doctor, her first trip in the TARDIS. She hadn't had any problems then. Like the bits of the brain that dealt with culture shock had been switched off as soon as she'd stepped into the console room. A side-effect of the TARDIS, or something in her genes?

Bregman pulled out a packet of cigarettes, and flicked it open. 'I only joined up so I could get to see the Cybermen. Straight out of technical college. Me, I mean, not the Cybermen. I wouldn't have joined the regular army if you'd held a gun to my head. Soldiers are boring. Cybermen are worth shooting at.' She gave Sam a meaningful glance. 'I was the kind of kid who had VirchCon fighters instead of Barbie dolls. You probably guessed that.'

Sam kept nodding. She'd had *Star Wars* figures, herself. Kathleen offered her the cigarette

box. 'Thanks, no.'

Kathleen grunted, then lit up a cigarette for herself with a disposable lighter, leaving the rest of the packet on the step beside her. 'I wasn't expecting them to be like this,' she said, between breaths of smoke. 'Qixotl. You friend. That Time Lord, what's his name? Homunculette. What I'm saying is, they look human, but they're not. You can tell. Don't know how.'

'Biodata,' suggested Sam. 'Something in the biology. The signals they give off.'

Kathleen shrugged. 'Right now, I'm supposed to be socialising. I think I'll lose my grip if I have to get near Homunculette again. You looked a hell of a lot more comfortable around your alien than I would've done, that's all I'm saying.'

'It's not like you expect,' Sam said. 'I mean, being with the Doctor.'

'Yeah? Why, what's it like?'

Sam had to think about that. 'It's like... look, I don't normally talk about this stuff, but I'll tell you, OK? It's like the one time I got totally off my face.'

'The *one* time? Are you sure you're human?'

Very funny, thought Sam. Yeah, the one time. The time she'd wanted to find out exactly how liberal-minded her parents were, when it came down to it. 'It was like everything looked out of sync, all of a sudden,' she told Kathleen. 'Like the world had moved two inches to the left, and no one had told me about it. You get paranoid, you get confused...'

'And that's what it feels like hanging around with an alien?'

'No. Listen. After a while, I figured out the best way of dealing with stuff, when you're in that kind of state. You have to act casual. You have to pretend the world's always been that way, and nothing unusual's happening. And that was what it was like, the first couple of weeks I spent away from Earth. It was one stupid situation after another. All these planets I got taken to, all these places where the sky's green or the sea's made out of acid.'

'Let me read between the lines here,' said Kathleen. 'What you're saying is, you went crazy.'

'No. You don't go crazy. Well, maybe you'd go crazy if you tried to fight it, but you don't. You give in to it. Like there's a new set of rules, and you have to go along with them. Does that make sense?'

Kathleen nodded, but Sam got the feeling she wasn't really following a word of it. Because Kathleen hadn't given in to it yet, had she? She was still trying to live in a safe, ordinary, straight-line kind of world, and it was going to drive her mad, if she wasn't careful.

Sam glanced down at the cigarette box, lying on the step between her and the Lieutenant. Sign of normality, she thought. The kind of thing you'd see stuffed down the back of the bike rack at Coal Hill, or lying in the gutters on Kingsland Road. Maybe the packet had been put there as a kind of reminder. A token of the things she'd given up when she'd walked into the TARDIS. A little something from the twentieth century.

She picked up the box, and read the logo on the front.

CLOUD TEN, it read. THE ORIGINAL CANNABIS CIGARETTE. MANUFACTURED IN BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND.

'You sure you don't want one?' Kathleen asked.

She wasn't dead. His companion

there was a hole in her side, but there was a pulse in her heart, the throbbing of engines in the lower levels of her body. Marie was in the guest room, and Homunculette was inside Marie, swimming in the space between her outer self and her inner self, forcing his way into the console room on the other side of the dimensional rupture.

A heartbeat to guide him. The scent of ions in her atmosphere. She was damaged, she wasn't dead, something in her had shut off the weapons systems in time. A safety protocol. Homunculette felt synthetic air on his face as he dragged himself into the console room. There was hardly any light, only the tiniest of vibrations beneath his feet. Marie's roundels were glowing, but dimly. Dying. Not dead.

She'd been attacked. There was an assassin, or a potential assassin, right here in the ziggurat. Somebody had violated his companion, probably with a virus of some kind. Somebody had tricked her into activating her defences, letting her weapons systems tear her apart from the inside.

An assassin. And it wasn't difficult to work out who.

Marie's mind was in pieces, but there was still power down in her belly, enough for an emergency resuscitation. She'd be repaired. Resurrected. And once her life had been restored, Homunculette told himself, the first thing he had to do was reactivate her weapons systems. There was an assassin, and the assassin would pay. One way or another, the will of the High Council would be done.

While, almost a light-year away, a single black spaceship flickered into existence, its scanning mechanisms locking onto a certain specific building on the surface of the Earth. Satisfied, the ship's pilot returned the vessel to interstitial space, and plotted a course for its final destination.

5

THE CONTINUITY BOMB

Bregman fished the invite card out of her pocket, then tried reading the small print. The light was still blazing off the surface of the card, even here inside the ziggurat. The words at the bottom of the text were blurred, and the letters kept shifting themselves around in front of Bregman's eyes.

Or rather, her eyes kept shifting themselves around in front of the letters. When the card had been lab-tested in Geneva, the English analysts had reported the text to be in English, the French analysts had reported the text to be in French, the German analysts had reported the text to be in German, and the Swiss analysts had reported the text to be in English, French, and German. All at the same time.

'Well?' asked the girl who called herself Sam.

Bregman started squinting. 'There's something here about "suitable accomodation will be provided", but I don't know if... does that word look like "hospitality" or "hospital" to you?'

'Er... "hospitality".'

'Thank God for that.' Bregman cast her eyes around the guest room Mr Qixotl had provided for her and the Colonel. As expected, the walls were made of stone and had flaming torches nailed into them, but apart from that the decor was pretty acceptable. There were two beds, both covered in duvets that could have consumed whole armies. A few smaller pieces of furniture were scattered around the room, soft armchairs in soft colours, even a couple of padded footstools.

Sam was checking out the fixtures and fittings as well, but she didn't look happy. 'Don't you think there's something odd about all this?' she asked.

'Uhh. Don't tell me. "Beneath this layer of apparent comfort lie the psychic tendrils of an alien mind parasite."'

Sam stared at her. Blankly. 'What, really?'

'I was quoting. UNISYC training film. OK, I'll go along with you. What's odd about all this?'

'This stuff.' Sam experimentally prodded an armchair, but it absolutely refused to turn into a hideous alien shape-shifter and bite her hand off. 'I mean, it's cosy, yeah, but what's the style supposed to be?'

'Style? I don't know. No style. It's just an armchair.'

'But there's no such thing as "just an armchair", right? If someone English makes a chair, the chair looks kind of Englishy. If someone African makes a chair, it looks kind of Africany. This chair doesn't look anything.' Sam indicated some of the other furnishings around the room. 'A couple of weeks ago I was in the fortieth century. And the chairs there looked all fortieth century-ish. I suppose you only start noticing this kind of thing when you time travel a lot.'

'What did you say?' said Bregman.

'I said, the chairs in the fortieth century -'

'No, to hell with the chairs, I meant about...' Bregman realised she had no way of asking the question "what do you mean, time travel?" without sounding like a moron, so she shut up. Sam kept talking.

'If Qixotl's a time-traveller too, and he knew he was going to have to do this room up specially for humans, I'd have thought he'd go out and look at human furniture in a history book or something. But the chairs and things don't look like they come from any period in history.'

'Great. The chairs aren't what they seem.' Bregman glanced over her shoulder at Kortez as she said it. The Colonel was sitting cross-legged on one of the beds, eyes closed, hands on his knees. Still meditating. You could give him a good slap around the ears right now, thought Bregman, and he still wouldn't come back down to Earth. She somehow resisted the temptation to test this hypothesis.

Sam was still agonising about the upholstery. 'I'm thinking about what the Doctor said. Biodata. D'you think you could tell what kind of furniture someone might like, just from what's in their biology?'

Bregman shrugged. 'Possible. You're talking about DNA, that kind of thing? If you know someone's got two legs and a tush from what's in their genes, you can probably figure out what kind of chairs they'd want to sit on.'

Sam snapped her fingers. 'And if you know what light frequencies and stuff their eyes respond to, you can work out the best colour scheme for them. Like this room. It's so... I don't know... *tasteful*. You know what I think? I think this whole place was put together using your biodata as a whatsit. As a template.'

Bregman mimed a round of applause. 'Jesus, you're good at this. All I know is, you're supposed to shake hands with them if they've got arms and shoot at them if they've got tentacles growing out their faces.' And even as she said it, something flashed across Bregman's mind, something bright and clear and unexpected. She wasn't sure, but she guessed that, from the outside, her eyes would be popping out of her head like she'd seen a vision of the Virgin Mary.

'You all right?' asked Sam.

'I think I just had a great idea,' said Bregman.

Trask was smiling, and had been ever since the human woman had come to the room. The smile had started out as a muscular twitch, the result of a social impulse Trask hadn't actually had any use for in nearly four hundred years. Since the woman had left, he'd had no reason to change his expression, so he hadn't bothered resetting his facial muscles.

He certainly wasn't happy, though. He wasn't anything, much. He was aware, as always, of his responsibilities, and that was as close to self-awareness as he wanted to get. His controllers had charged him with the task of recovering the Relic, and carrying it back to Mictlan by whatever means became necessary. Beyond that, there was nothing of importance to consider. No need for any new thoughts inside his head.

Ideas are for the living.

For the first time in decades, Trask felt himself flinch. Ideas are for the living. It was true, of course, it was very true. But the thought was, in itself, an idea.

Please don't be alarmed, Mr Trask. It's only me.

The Shift. The first entity Trask had encountered when he'd returned to Earth, when he'd turned up at the City entrance with the sun searing his eyes and the heat of the forest burning the dead flesh off his limbs. The Shift was in his head. Nestling at the back of his brain.

I apologise for my directness, Mr Trask. Usually, I'd be much more subtle when communicating with a more physical being than myself. However, your quarters are a little sparse. Not much opportunity for manifestation, if you understand me.

'Yes,' said Trask, thinking on his feet.

And there aren't many concepts in your mind I can easily, shall we say, inhabit. This is why I'm speaking to you directly through the creative centres of your brain. This would kill any living creature, I'm sure. However, your creative centres aren't doing very much, at the moment. No offence intended.

'No offence taken,' Trask replied.

Another bidder has arrived in the City, Mr Trask. I thought you should be informed. Nobody seems to know who he is or what effect he might have on the auction.

Trask thought about this for a moment or two. 'And?'

Mr Trask, I know who you represent, and you know who I represent. Naturally, I'm quite happy for us to keep each other's secrets, but you'd have to admit, our objectives are... in opposition, shall we say? Officially, our respective employers wouldn't want anyone to know we had even this degree of contact.

Trask nodded, but said nothing.

The balance of power must be maintained, Mr Trask. A threat to your people is also a threat to mine. He's coming. Perhaps you'll see what I mean.

'Good afternoon,' said a new voice. It took Trask a while to figure out that it had come from somewhere on the outside of his head.

There was someone standing at the threshold of his room. Trask wasn't sure about the man's species, but he stank of life. He was tall, slim, long-legged. He looked shocked when Trask made eye contact with him, but he recovered himself quite well.

'Nice to see a happy face around here,' said the man, smiling genially. 'I don't think we've met. My name's Smith, or at least, that's the *nom de guerre* I seem to keep ending up with, lifetime after lifetime. At least I didn't choose it myself, this time. And you are...?'

'Trask,' said Trask.

'Ah. Well, I was wondering if you could help me. I'm looking for Mr Qixotl. I don't suppose you have any idea...?'

The man's eyes were darting around the room, taking in the decor. Or lack of it. 'No,' Trask said.

The stranger nodded, apparently having run out of things to say. 'Yes. Well. I'm sure I'll be seeing more of you later, anyway. Goodbye for now, Mr Trask.' The man turned to go, then stopped dead. He glanced over his shoulder, just briefly. 'And you, Mr Shift.'

A moment later, he was gone.

You see?

Trask nodded.

I've got things to do before the auction, Mr Trask. I thought it was only fair to warn you about this new... well, let's not call it a threat. Let's call it a "concern".

'Thank you,' croaked Trask, but the Shift didn't reply.

Alone again, Trask considered the "concern". He wasn't convinced the new bidder would make any difference to his plans. Whoever the man Smith was, he was life. And all life was susceptible.

An entirely unexpected thought suddenly unravelled inside Trask's head.

Life. When he'd seen Smith, the first thing he'd noticed hadn't been the man's face, or his body, or his clothes. It had been that quality of life. Stronger than it was in most organisms. Strong enough that you could smell it, if you knew what to smell for. Trask had only scented that kind of intensity in a living thing once before, and that had been in the early years, when he'd taken life for granted. The early years. The final moments.

Trask remembered being under the water, choking on his last mouthful of oxygen but not being able to let it go. His arms, weaker than they should have been, were trying to pull the rest of his body up to the surface. His hands broke free of the water, touched air above his head, but something was dragging him down, tugging at his ankles. There was liquid pressing against every inch of skin, searching for an opening. Ready to fill up his lungs. It was supposed to be a good way to die, a peaceful way, but Trask knew it'd all be over as soon as he gave up and tried to breathe in. That was the hardest thing to take. Knowing that when he died, it would be *his* fault. There was no peace in a death like that.

And then he saw the face, hovering in the air on the other side of the surface. Inches above his head. The face was old, serious, a terrible frown stretched between a pair of sagging cheeks. The man who'd brought him here to die.

Trask looked up at the man, and saw him for what he was. Life. Sheer life. And the quality was infectious. So infectious that Trask managed to fight against the lake for a good thirty seconds more before the last of the air slipped out of his lungs.

So infectious that even now, sitting in the ziggurat centuries later, Trask could feel the panic and the nausea seeping into his nervous system, even though he knew he was supposed to be dead to feeling. Life. The man who'd appeared in the doorway of the guest room had been just like the man on the other side of the water. His face was different, though. Younger. So it couldn't be, surely couldn't be, the same man.

'...Smith, or at least, that's the nom de guerre I seem to keep ending up with, lifetime after lifetime...'

Unless...

'...keep ending up with, lifetime after lifetime...'

Was it possible...?

'...lifetime after lifetime...'

Was it possible that Smith was the one?

The one who, all those years ago, had been responsible for putting Trask among the ranks of the dead?

'Run this by me again,' said Sam. 'What is it we're supposed to be doing, exactly?'

Lieutenant Bregman – Kathleen – was hurtling through the corridors of the ziggurat, her head darting from side to side, peeking into the corners, nosing around in the alcoves. 'We want to find the other guest rooms. They're all supposed to be in the same passage, but Qixotl moved us around after I found the dead guy.'

Sam tried to keep up with her. Physically as well as conceptually. 'Um, what kind of dead guy was this? I mean, a murdered dead guy, or a guy who just happened to be dead?'

'A smiling dead guy. Forget about it, it doesn't matter right now.' They reached another junction, and Kathleen swung off to the right. 'It's like you said. The guest rooms can tell you everything you need to know about the people staying there. Right?'

Sam sucked her lip. 'Wait a minute. Kathleen, are you suggesting...?'

'Look, I'm UNISYC, OK? And yeah, I know we're not the most professional outfit in the world –'

'I didn't know that,' Sam mumbled.

'– but the defence of this planet is kind of in our brief. So what I'm saying is, we have a quick look around the other rooms, and we get the advantage. We can start figuring out exactly what the other BEMs are, and why they're here, maybe.'

'Kathleen.' Sam grabbed the woman's shoulder, dragging her to a halt. Kathleen looked irritated, but relieved at the same time, as if she were glad she'd been given an excuse to stop running. 'Listen. Half an hour ago you looked like your head was going to burst if you saw another alien. Now you're trying to break into their hotel rooms.'

'We don't have to break in. There aren't any doors.'

'"We"? Who's this "we"? ' Kathleen gave Sam a suspicious look. Sam tutted at her. 'I don't mean I'm going to turn out to be a Martian spy or anything. I mean, in case you'd forgotten, we're supposed to be rivals here. We're both bidding for the Relic, whatever it's meant to be.' Bregman, Sam had learned, didn't know what the auction was all about either. The Colonel did, but he wasn't saying anything. At least, he wasn't saying anything that made sense.

'The auction isn't the main thing. It's a question of planetary security.' Sam wasn't sure if Kathleen was quoting another UNISYC training film, or just talking drivel. 'We're both human, that's what matters here.'

'What?'

'Look, I don't... I don't know how to say this. We were standing there in our room, and you said what you said about biodata, and... it made sense, OK? I had this idea, and it made sense. Christ, I don't know. I don't know what else to say. I think maybe I'm starting to figure out how to do my job properly.'

Sam sighed. Loudly. 'Kathleen, you're a seriously messed-up individual.'

'Yeah, well, I'm UNISYC. I'm probably going to end up like the Colonel one day, I might as well practise being a sad loser now.' She started sniffing around the passageway, with a faintly bemused look on her face, as if she'd forgotten where she was.

Sam tried to distract her. 'Speaking of the Colonel, don't you think we should tell him what we're doing...?'

'He's meditating. It's like hypnosis, you can do serious damage to someone's psyche if you wake them up early. Hey, Sam?'

'Yeah?'

'I think we've found something.'

Kathleen had moved a few paces up the corridor, and now she was standing in front of one of the open doorways, staring into the room on the other side. She had the same vaguely sick look Sam had seen on her face in the cocktail lounge.

With less than absolute confidence, Sam skipped up to her side, and peered through the doorway. Several hundred skulls peered back at her.

There was power in the circuits again, light across the dome of the console room. Homunculette moved around the curve of the wall, pressing his hands against the access panels of Marie's inner body. Generally, Homunculette didn't have much of a soft touch; he rarely got more sensitive than being able to tell the difference between ethanol and stain remover. But this was different. This was...

Marie. He closed his eyes, felt the bastard tear ducts bulging behind the lids again, and

wondered, in the few bits of his brain that stayed logical, why the ducts hadn't been evolved out of the Time Lord biosystem centuries ago. He could feel the life left in Marie's body, the traces of sentience buried in the material of the wall. Her mind was in pieces. Somewhere in her depths, Homunculette knew, there'd be the memory record of her last moments. Her last moments as a complete entity.

He had to find it. To know what she'd been thinking. To share what she'd experienced, even. He knew she'd been attacked, and he knew who'd attacked her, so the information wasn't actually useful, as such. It was personal thing. One way or another, he had to feel he'd been with her when it had happened.

Homunculette opened his eyes again, forced himself to look around the console room. The room was intact, now he'd used the drone clamps to stabilise Marie's architectural core, but the systems were still a mess. Every TARDIS existed on millions of levels, a lot of them too subtle for even the Time Lord mind to perceive; the structure of the console room was only a model of the true heart of the ship, scaled down to fit into its user's senses. Marie was sick, you could tell that at a glance, because the access panels lining the walls looked buckled and burnt, as if the room had been gutted by fire.

Ridiculous, of course. The fabric of a TARDIS could stand a full-on thermonuclear blast without so much as a scorch mark. The singed panels were there for the sake of appearance, the ship's way of letting Homunculette know something was wrong. As if he'd needed telling. By the same token, the floor had turned the colour of ash, and fractured electrical cables hung limply from the ceiling, tiny blue sparks jumping from break to break.

Hovering in the centre of the room was a full-length hologram of a single humanoid figure. Getting the hologram projection system back in order had been a nightmare, and Homunculette had almost literally been forced to hammer the circuits into submission with a sonic monkey-wrench. Even now, the hologram was pale, bleached, slightly blurry. When Marie had been attacked, her external interface had been ruptured. Homunculette had rectified that before he'd done anything else. He'd programmed the chameleon circuit to reform her outer body, healing over the wound.

The hologram was linked to the chameleon circuit, and displayed an image of the way Marie looked on the outside. She was shorter than she had been, blonde, pale-skinned. She wore a dark blue uniform, with a silver badge and a dinky little hat. Marie's default setting, these days. A year or so ago, Homunculette had taken her to twentieth century London, and while they'd been there the chameleon circuit had jammed. As a result, Marie had been stuck in the shape of a 1960s British policewoman for several months. Homunculette had fixed the fault, eventually, but whenever Marie had trouble with her internals, the old policewoman body would usually pop back into existence.

Homunculette realised he'd closed his eyes again. More salt-water under his lids. Stupid. Marie was his companion, officially assigned to him by the High Council. He was supposed to be an agent of war. Attachment was supposed to be unthinkable.

But Marie had been attacked. And whatever Qixotl said, it was obvious, painfully obvious, what had happened. Something had messed around with the structure of space-time, even the stranger in the velvet jacket had known that.

At any other time, Homunculette would have suspected the agents of the enemy. But not here. Not now. After all, everybody knew about the Faction. Everybody knew about their rituals, the blood-hungry voodoo rites they used as window-dressing to cover up the procedures they'd stolen from the Time Lords. They tore holes in the continuum, put it down to the work of the "Spirits", even acted like they were proud of the damage they did. Bastards. Sadistic, bloodthirsty bastards.

Homunculette felt his fingers tighten, only now noticing the way he'd been holding the sonic monkey wrench. Weighing it up in his palm, gripping it like a club. Before he even knew what he was doing, his thumb had flicked the trigger, deactivating the sonic mechanism. Turning the wrench into nothing more than a lump of heavy metal.

The Doctor was concerned. For someone who had, on many occasions, fooled himself into thinking the universe was his responsibility and his responsibility alone, concern was nothing new. But this was a particularly heavy and ominous kind of concern. The kind you could cut up into slices and serve with chips.

He'd been pacing the corridors of the ziggurat for a good hour now, poking his nose into the side-passages, going everywhere he thought he could go without triggering the alarm systems. There was still no sign of Mr Qixotl. The man had wanted to talk, but after that business with the TARDIS-woman, he'd simply vanished. On his travels around the building, the Doctor had talked to the living dead, enjoyed a long "conversation" with the Shift, and even waved to a Paradox cultist (surely a first), but he was no wiser about what was going on here.

The Doctor turned the next corner, and practically walked into Mr Homunculette.

Homunculette looked much as he had done in the cocktail lounge, only worse. The Doctor beamed when he saw the man, and opened up his arms in what he hoped looked like a gesture of comradeship. In truth, he was spreading his arms to stop Homunculette getting past him in the corridor.

'Mr Homunculette, I presume?' the Doctor said. 'I'm sorry, I don't think we were properly introduced.'

Homunculette stopped dead. 'I've been told you're here on behalf of the Time Lords,' the Doctor went on. 'An ancient and noble race, so I've heard. I wondered if I could talk to you about them for a moment.'

'Get out of my way,' droned Homunculette.

The Doctor glanced down at the thing in Homunculette's hand. A tool of some kind, evidently, covered in jury-rigged high-tech add-ons. Under any other circumstances, the Doctor would have approved of the workmanship. Exactly the kind of thing he might have put together himself, in fact.

But Homunculette was holding it in much the same way you'd hold a weapon. The Doctor wondered how much damage the Time Lord was capable of doing. He was wiry, not very muscular, but it wasn't wise to underestimate someone on the brink of gibbering neurosis.

So the Doctor stepped aside, and let Homunculette stomp off around the corner.

'Not very talkative,' mused the Doctor. Still, perhaps that was for the best. What could he have asked the man, anyway? "How are things back at home, in my future?" Puerile, even if it hadn't been against the Law.

A war, the Shift had told him. Gallifrey was involved in a war. He could have asked Homunculette who the old homeworld was supposed to be fighting, at least. He could have asked what kind of enemy could have pushed the High Council this far, far enough to forget about their non-interventionist policy and get mixed up in Qixotl's auction. It was true, what he'd said to Sam, about the Time Lords not being able to see into their own futures. All part of the mechanisms Rassilon had created when he'd kick-started the Eye of Harmony and installed the interfaces in the first TARDIS units. If the Doctor had slipped between the cracks of the system, stumbled across a piece of forbidden history...

Then what? What would he do with the foreknowledge? Find out who the Time Lords were – would be – up against, and try to wipe the enemy forces out before they got aggressive?

The Doctor shuddered. 'Talk about a pre-emptive strike,' he muttered.

It was possible, though. He could stop the war before it even began. History would bend that far, if he asked it nicely. And it was certainly what the High Council would have wanted him to do. Even the Celestial Intervention Agency would have backed him up, this time.

But he didn't work for the High Council. He was a free agent. Wasn't he?

The Doctor shook his head. He had to find Mr Qixotl. He had to find out what was at stake here, what was on offer at the auction. Then, and only then, could he start making plans.

It wasn't a room. It was a shrine.

Bregman didn't know exactly where the dividing line was between a "room" and a "shrine", but she was pretty sure this place crossed it, and then some. It was bigger than the other guest rooms, for a start. A great domed area, like the inside of a cathedral, with black girders forming black arches across a black ceiling. The decor was appalling, no other word for it. The walls were inset with circular indentations, dozens and dozens of them, roundels covering every available surface. Set into each of the circles was a skull.

So far, Bregman hadn't talked herself into getting too close to any of them, but she guessed the skulls were real. Frozen into the walls with their jaws locked open. The way the shrine was

designed, they looked almost like organic elements, like they'd grown out of the architecture. The floor was paved with metal slabs, the colour of decay, each one covered in swirls of dirt and lines of rust. At least, Bregman hoped it was rust. There was another possibility, of course.

In the centre of the dome was a dais, a section of flooring raised a couple of centimetres above the rest of the room. A perfect circle, about a metre from side to side. The lines and scratches were more intense there. Bregman could make out hints of geometric patterns, but nothing definite. Several layers of the rust-substance coated the dais, each set of squiggles covering up the last.

'Urr,' said Sam. At this moment in time, it was the most profound thing any human being could possibly have said.

'I'm not going to be sick,' Bregman croaked, once she'd got her throat back under control. 'I'm definitely, positively, absolutely not going to be sick.'

Sam stepped forward, her shoes squealing against the floor of the shrine. There was a hell of an echo in here. 'Well, I think we can make some pretty good guesses about who this belongs to.'

'Uh-huh. The two with the bat-masks. Faction something.'

'Paradox.' Sam started snuffling around the edges of the shrine, looking curious. Curious, thought Bregman. Not completely revolted. Worrying, that. The girl was young, young enough to be in high school, but she acted like a post-grad archaeology student hanging around her first dig, wading through the old bones with her eyes wide open and her tongue hanging out. Probably the way the Doctor had trained her.

'It's bigger than all the other rooms,' Sam pointed out.

'Yeah, I kind of noticed.'

'And there aren't any torches. The other rooms have got torches, whatever the furniture's like.' Sam nodded towards the nearest wall. There, planted between the gaping roundels, was a vertical strip that looked a lot like a neon tube. There were a lot of them around the shrine, filling the air with a queasy blue-tinted light. 'The atmosphere feels different, too. And I might be wrong about this, but I think the doorway's at a funny angle.'

Bregman felt like screaming. 'Enough, OK? What's your point?'

'I don't think this room's part of the building at all. I think it kind of... materialised here.' Sam crossed the floor again, giving the dais a wide berth. She was heading for the other opening, Bregman realised, the archway set into the wall on the far side of the dome. 'See? Another way out. I'll bet you any money you like it goes deeper into the ship.'

'Ship?' Bregman queried.

Sam stopped by the doorway. She slipped her hand into the back pocket of her jeans, although it looked to Bregman like an automatic movement, like she didn't really know what she was doing. For the first time, Bregman noticed a big lump in the fabric there. 'Faction Paradox,' Sam was saying. 'Didn't that man... Homunculette, is that his name? Didn't he say something about the Faction nicking their technology off the Time Lords? Oh, hell.'

Sam had fished a small paperback book out of her pocket. From the other side of the room, Bregman could see the words GENETIC POLITICS BEYOND SOMETHING-OR-OTHER on the cover. Sam was staring at the book as though she'd just pulled a live mackerel out of her pants.

'I thought I left this...' she began, then trailed off. 'Whatever. The Doctor's magic pockets must be infectious.' She started flicking through the book, finally stopping at a page near the end.

She mumbled something Bregman didn't quite catch, but it sounded like "I wonder if a fraction hose how to builder tar diss".

It was at 17:44, when he was starting to think about letting the sun set over the Unthinkable City, that Mr Qixotl's luck ran out and he met up with the Doctor.

Really, he should have confronted the Time Lord as soon as he'd had the chance, but quite frankly Qixotl didn't have the nerve to go through with that kind of full-scale confrontation. So he'd been scurrying around the ziggurat like a headless cockroach for the last hour or so, finding things to do around the passageways, little loose ends to be tied up before the auction. Anything to put off the inevitable.

Finally, he made the mistake of leaving the high-security section on the second level and taking the staircase back down to the ground floor. The Doctor was waiting for him at the bottom of the

steps. That was the way it seemed to Qixotl, anyhow. The meeting was probably accidental, but the Doctor had a nasty habit of making everything he did look preplanned.

'At last!' the Doctor said, clapping his hands together.

Just my luck, thought Qixotl, he's in one of his self-righteous regenerations. Qixotl froze on the steps, giving himself the advantage of height, if nothing else. 'Erm, yeah. Doctor. Hi. Listen. I'm a bit busy right now -'

'So I see,' interrupted the Doctor. Mr Qixotl wondered if anyone around here would ever let him finish a sentence. 'The Time Lords. Faction Paradox. The living dead. Quite an assortment.'

'Business is business, Doctor. Can't begrudge a man for trying to make a decent living, can you?'

The Doctor looked suspicious. 'And you know who I am, as well. Have we met before?'

'Er, well...'

'"Qixotl". That's not your real name.'

'How d'you know?'

'Because "Qixotl" is what they call the god of ludicrous profit margins on Golobus. Quite ego-centric of you, I'd have thought.' He furrowed his forehead. 'We've met before. I know we have. I'm not sure you always had that face, though. I can't quite put my finger on what it is about you...'

'Well, never mind that now, yeah?' Qixotl realised he was backing away up the stairs. The Doctor was advancing accordingly, matching him step for step. 'Look, Doctor, you know what it's like. I've got enough on my hands, y'know, what with having to stop the bidders tearing each other to bits and all. I really don't think they're going to be too happy about someone like you walking around the place, no offence meant.'

The Doctor took offence anyway. 'Why? Do I have some kind of reputation?'

That's putting it mildly, thought Mr Qixotl. 'You're making things a bit more, er, complicated, that's all. Why don't you go away and leave us to it, yeah? I mean, it's not like we're threatening the planet or anything.'

'What are you doing here, Qixotl?'

And all of a sudden, Qixotl noticed the Doctor's eyes. The way they were blazing, a brilliant, hypnotic blue. He got the impression the Doctor had been practising his stare all day, and had only just managed to get it right. 'You don't want to know, Doc. I mean, Doctor. Trust me.'

'It's an auction. So what are you auctioning? Something very valuable, I should think, if the Time Lords are involved. Not a work of art, I'd guess. A weapon?' The Doctor kept advancing. Mr Qixotl kept retreating. He got the horrible feeling he was going to run out of steps pretty soon.

'Well, yeah. I mean, the Time Lords think it's a weapon.'

'They *think* it's a weapon?'

'It's the codes. The biodata codes.'

'Go on.'

'The body's biodata. There's something in it they think they can use to win their war. I don't know. That's what Mr H... that's what Homunculette told me.'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, but didn't blink. 'A body? That's what this Relic of yours is? You're auctioning off a body?'

Mr Qixotl nodded, dumbly. Then he stumbled backwards, his legs trying to find the next step up and discovering there wasn't one. He thumped down onto his backside at the top of the stairs.

The Doctor stood over him, nodding thoughtfully. 'That makes sense. Faction Paradox are obsessed with biodata, their rituals run on it. But to go to all this trouble... it must be the body of someone important. Someone with a reputation. Someone with unique elements in their biological profile.'

'Well, yeah.'

'Who, Qixotl? Whose body is it?'

'Look, I know you're upset -'

'Whose *body*?'

Again, that stare. Solid blue. Qixotl swallowed, really, really hard.

'Yours,' he squeaked. 'Sorry.'

THE FACTION'S STORY

Smithmanstown, Dronid, local year 15414

The dreams were getting worse. Or rather, the dream was getting worse; it was the same each time, and Cousin Sanjira couldn't remember dreaming of anything else since he'd been assigned to the Mission. It didn't come every night, but whenever it came, the details were clearer, the colours were brighter, and the pain was sharper.

In the dream, Sanjira was a boy again. Lying in his bed, in his room at the family orphanage, in the hills on the other side of the capital. The room was dark, but Sanjira felt sure it had the same bleached walls and arched windows as his room at the Mission, as if his real surroundings were trying to overwrite the architecture of the dream. He felt rough, sweat-hardened blankets over his body, rubbing against his bare skin, his skinny fingers pulling the material up over his nose and mouth. He was eight years old, and he was afraid.

Because there was someone else in the room. The first time he'd had the dream, he'd thought the figure had been dressed all in black, but now he was beginning to realise its robes were a deep, dirty red. The figure didn't have a face, not a proper one. There was a skull on top of its neck, the bone features of an animal young Sanjira didn't recognise.

There was a patch of cold under Sanjira's legs. Urine across the undersheet. The skull-faced man stepped forward, towards the bed, bringing with it the scent of leather and dead skin. A silver scar, a shape Sanjira had never been able to identify, opened up among the folds of its gown. Then, as always, there was pain. Young Sanjira cried out, and old Sanjira, in his bed at the Mission, cried out along with him.

When Sanjira awoke, there was light in the room, and a sick throbbing under his ribs. Ghost pain, worse than usual. His eyes flickered across the ceiling above him, tracing the filthy black cracks from one side of the room to the other, finally focusing on the space at the end of the bed.

The ceremony mask was there, as ever, perched on its little wooden stand. The face of the creature in the dream, of course. Strange; the eight-year-old Sanjira in the dream never recognised the mask, even though old Sanjira woke up with it staring him in the face every day of his life. But then, Sanjira mused, I wouldn't have known what a ceremony mask looked like when I was eight. The family never showed its artefacts, its "fetishes", to the children. He'd been thirty-four when his own mask had been presented to him, when he'd risen from Little Brother to Cousin.

Sanjira crawled out of the bed, reached for his dayrobe, and folded it around his body, trying to ignore the sense of revulsion he felt when he saw his own bloodless, withered limbs slipping into the sleeves. Fifty years old, looking eighty, at least. The other members of the family at the Mission talked about that, behind his back. They said he'd made a pact with bad Spirits, and this was the price he'd paid.

He would have laughed, if he'd had the strength. The others were different. They were young, they'd been brought to Dronid from worlds as far apart as Lurma and Salostopus, but Sanjira had been born and raised here, and he knew the truth of it. There were things in the air on Dronid, things the locals never talked about. They took you apart, hour by hour, year by year. They bit chunks out of your life, ate away your skin and bones.

The legacy of the Time Lords, thought Sanjira. They'd done so much to this planet. So much damage.

'Cousin?'

Sanjira didn't bother to turn. He knew what he'd see. Little Sister Justine, wearing the same outfit, day in and day out. The black velvet dress she'd brought from Earth, when the family had recruited her. She'd be hovering in the doorway of Sanjira's room, her head bowed respectfully. He wondered if she'd spend the rest of her life like this. He imagined her as an old woman, worn to nothing by Dronid, her red hair turned grey, performing the same old duties decade after decade.

Sanjira mumbled the Earliest Prayer; Justine gave all the correct responses. She was only sev-

enteen, Sanjira remembered. Still young enough to take the Spirits at face value.

'There's news, Cousin,' Justine said, once the formalities were over. 'Little Brother Kolman is back from the city. He's been watching the Corporation for us.'

Sanjira moved across to one of the windows, as he did every morning. It was a hole in the wall, nothing more; no weather on Dronid these days, no wind or rain, no need for glass. Outside, on the street behind the Mission, there was nothing but red dust and crumbling stonework. A handful of young men lurked among the ruins on the other side of the street, doing their best to look macho and dangerous whenever anybody wandered past. 'And?' Sanjira prompted.

'Kolman believes the Corporation has found a relic,' Justine went on. There was a touch of excitement in her voice, which she wasn't hiding quite well enough. 'Under the wreckage of the city centre. Hidden in an underground bunker, he says.'

Sanjira turned to her, at last. The Little Sister's head was still bowed. 'A relic? What sort of relic?'

'The Little Brother wasn't certain, Cousin. He described it as a coffin, though he couldn't examine it closely. Not without the Corporation noticing him. They say the bunker's been there since the Cataclysm.'

Sanjira coughed a chuckle out of his throat. "Cataclysm". So dramatic, the newbloods. The Time Lords had fought the first battle of their war on Dronid almost half a century ago. The natives never spoke of it, but the off-worlders liked to think of it as a War in Heaven, all hellfire and thunder.

Of course, Sanjira knew better. It wasn't the battle that had destroyed the cities, it wasn't the battle that had sucked the life out of the planet. The Time Lords had done that after the battle had ended, in a desperate attempt to cover their tracks. Gallifrey liked to keep its secrets.

'It's a Time Lord artefact?' Sanjira queried.

Little Sister Justine wrinkled her nose. 'The Little Brother wasn't sure. He... acted rather rashly.'

'Explain.'

'He contacted some of the family's allies in the city. They agreed to attack the Corporation's stronghold there.' Justine sniffed the air as she spoke. 'Kolman thought... he believed the relic might be of some importance, Cousin. A Time Lord weapon, perhaps. Left over from the Cataclysm.'

'The Little Brother should have consulted me first, as well he must know.' Sanjira tried to sound angry, but the effort made him feel very, very tired. 'Nevertheless. I should like to examine this item at first hand. And the smell that's troubling you, Little Sister, is my own urine. I've wet my bed. Does that bother you?'

Justine kept her eyes fixed on the floor. Her face was too pale to blush, though. 'No, Cousin Sanjira.'

'Good. We shouldn't let these small things worry us. Now. Leave me. I need to dress.'

It took them the best part of a day to reach the city from Smithmanstown. The family owned an automobile, one of the few that had survived the "Cataclysm", although its bodywork had been eaten away by the clockwork bacteria the Time Lords had introduced to the planet, and its engine pumped thick black smoke into the atmosphere wherever it went. There were no roads connecting the towns any more, so the machine trundled over the mounds of debris that had once been the suburbs, stopping in the shanty-towns whenever Justine became travel sick.

They passed fewer and fewer people as they drove into the city centre. The place was poisonous, and everyone knew it; you just didn't live there, unless you could afford the alien medical equipment the Corporation peddled. The stronghold, when they reached it, turned out to be a rotting three-storey building that had once been an administration office. Apt, Sanjira decided. The cults and the criminal groups were the only government Dronid had left. The Corporation made its home in the capital, while Faction Paradox was busy trying to rebuild its powerbase in the smaller towns around it.

Briefly, Sanjira wondered if the planet was really worth fighting over, but he put the thought out of his mind.

On the inside, the building wasn't much different to the Mission, all bleached walls and dirty

cracks. Evidently, the attack on the stronghouse had finished some time ago. There were bodies in the foyer, fallen Corporation security guards, half a dozen or so arranged in a messy, blood-flecked heap by the doorway. Some of the family's city allies hovered in the shadows at the edges of the room, giggling among themselves and eyeing up Justine as she walked past them.

All men, Sanjira noted. Many of them had teeth sharpened to points. At least, Sanjira hoped they'd been sharpened, he certainly hadn't heard of the city atmosphere causing DNA mutations like that. Most were dressed in suits, the kind that had been popular among the upwardly-mobile underclasses before the Time Lords had arrived, with gold medallions dangling around their scrawny necks. The usual tribal identifiers, thought Sanjira. Their forefathers had probably belonged to the ghetto gangs, before the cities had fallen.

They'd all be dead by thirty. Still, if they made useful allies, so much the better. It was good to have disposable people on your side.

They found the relic in an office, which Sanjira assumed had belonged to the stronghouse's commander-in-chief, while he'd been alive. The room was, like all the others, white-walled and grubby, but there were no windows, the only light coming from a paraffin lamp nailed to the ceiling.

In the centre of the office was a desk, and perched on the desk, more than a little precariously, was a casket. It was metallic, with two symbols Sanjira didn't recognise etched into its lid, and it pulsed with a soft silver light, which the Cousin guessed would probably be hypnotic if you stared at it for long enough. One of the Faction's allies slouched in a chair by the desk, his squinty little eyes searching the room for something to rest his feet on. Two of his underlings hovered nearby, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

'Got your box,' the leader said, when Sanjira stepped forward. The man's face was long, his features were lumpy, and he dribbled when he spoke. Sanjira presumed some sort of genetic deformity was involved.

The Cousin moved to inspect the casket. The two thugs shuffled towards him, doing their best to look menacing. There was something not quite right about their eyes, Sanjira noticed. Possibly it was the drugs they were taking.

'Did I say you could touch it?' drooled their leader.

Sanjira attempted to look pious. 'Do I take it you're going to ask for remuneration?'

The leader sniggered like a moron. He probably was a moron, though, so the Cousin couldn't fault him for that. 'Cost us lots to get into this place. Guns. Ammo. Organisational costs. Follow?'

Frankly, Sanjira was amazed he could say words like "organisational" without slobbering. 'What do you want?' he asked.

'Want you to look into something. Want your help. Use those special bug-eyes you got.'

'Look into what, precisely?'

The man grinned a saw-toothed grin. 'Future. Our future. Corporation's starting to notice us, follow? Ambushes. Set-ups. They say, either you work with us, or you don't work. We want to know how they're tooled up. Where they're going to be moving in, when they're thinking of playing bad little tricks on us. Don't want to get snuck up on. Don't want to work for them. Don't want to work for anyone.'

'I think we can come to some arrangement,' Sanjira said. Justine looked horrified, but she didn't speak. 'Of course, I'll need to inspect the casket before I can agree to anything,' he added.

The leader glanced at his men. Then he shrugged, and got to his feet. 'You can look. Don't get too excited, heh?' And, with another nasty little gurgle, the man sauntered out of the office, his two lapdogs in tow.

Justine waited until they were out of earshot before she spoke. 'Cousin, you can't... that is, with respect...'

Sanjira approached the casket, and ran his fingers across the lid. Yes. As he'd thought. A coffin, Time Lord design. 'Is there a problem, Little Sister? Perhaps you don't think we should do deals with our allies?'

Justine bowed her head. 'Cousin, he wants us to use the techniques for his own benefit. The Spirits... such a thing would be disrespectful, surely?'

'It's wise to keep one's allies happy, Little Sister.'

'But the Spirits...'

'The Spirits are a convenience. Their prime function is to be useful, not to be worshipped. Which is the greater weapon? The Grandfather himself, or the awe the people have for him?'

'I... Cousin, forgive me. I don't understand.' Justine didn't seem to know where to look. Obviously, she decided her best option was to change the subject, because she asked: 'The relic. It's what you expected?'

'Yes. A body. Almost certainly a Time Lord.'

'Is his biomass useful?'

Sanjira patted the lid of the casket. 'We have all the Gallifreyan data we could possibly need. A corpse is of no value to us. We have no control over the dead, even if we have their biodata. That's the way of the Celestis, not the way of the family.'

Little Sister Justine looked puzzled. 'Forgive me, Cousin. If that's true, why do you want to bargain for the casket?'

'Because the dead must be given their due rites. Even the dead of Gallifrey. Besides which, I want to make our allies feel they're getting something for nothing. If they defect to the Corporation, Dronid will never be ours.'

He thought about that for a moment. 'What's left of Dronid will never be ours,' he corrected himself.

They performed the ritual back at the Mission, in the chambers of the family shrine. Cousin Sanjira let Justine speak the Parting Prayer. When the Spirits latched onto the casket, and pulled it away through the folds of space-time, the Little Sister actually jumped. She'd never been responsible for a dematerialisation before, Sanjira remembered. He tried not to smile at the look on her face.

She'd performed the rite well, though. One day, when she realised the true significance of the Spirits, she'd make a good Cousin. Perhaps even a good Mother.

They watched the progress of the casket on one of the shrine's monitors, watched it tumbling away through the vortex, heading towards whatever destination the Spirits had chosen for it. Justine, as was traditional, prayed that the body might cause as much damage to causality as possible. Once the image had faded from the monitor, Sanjira tried to explain why it was so important to give even the enemies of the family the proper last rites. Ceremony was the key, he told her. When she understood that, she'd understand the Spirits.

He knew she'd get it one day.

The dream was different that night.

Cousin Sanjira was an old man, not a boy. He was wearing his family robes, stained with the spilt biomass of a dozen ceremonies, the mask over his face making him cough and wheeze. He moved through a building full of beds, a sleeping child tucked into each and every one. Alarmingly, there was a knife in his hand. He recognised it as the ceremonial blade from the Mission, the one he and Justine had used to draw the blood for the dematerialisation rite.

A silhouette slipped out of a darkened corner, and blocked the doorway ahead of Sanjira, a living wall of dried blood and black muscle. The apparition had one arm, although the shadow it cast had two. Sanjira tried to draw another breath, but the air turned to smoke in his lungs. The Grandfather had one arm, the family legends claimed. He'd cut off the other one himself, to remove the tattoo the Time Lords had branded him with. Could it really be...?

'I'm not the Grandfather,' the silhouette said. 'Only a messenger.'

Sanjira tried to speak. He felt like falling to his knees, like screaming, like running. He remembered what he'd said to Justine about the Spirits; heresy, even if it happened to be true. Please, he thought, please no. I meant no disrespect, but Justine is so young, she doesn't realise...

'That isn't the problem,' said the messenger. Its voice was smooth, but soft, no louder than a hiss. 'It's about the body.'

'The body?' Sanjira managed to rasp.

'Oh, yes. What did you do, Cousin? What did you throw away? The Spirits are distressed. The Grandfather is displeased.'

'I performed the proper rites,' Sanjira protested, wheezing with every syllable. He tried to prize off the mask, but it wouldn't budge. The silhouette laughed, and its shadow laughed with it.

'Oh, idiot boy! Through biodata, we become strong. This is our way. The Relic was handed to you on a plate, and you gave it up to the vortex. Its will is too strong for the Spirits to steer its passage. The Relic is lost to us, now.'

'It was a dead body!' Sanjira coughed. 'Dead! Its biodata was of no use!'

'A legend never dies, Cousin. You should know that.'

'A legend?' Sanjira clawed at the mask, and felt one of his fingernails break against the bone. 'Then the body... who...?'

The one-armed shape leaned forward, and whispered in Cousin Sanjira's ear. It whispered the name of the dead Time Lord, told the Cousin the true nature of the body in the box. The whispers echoed inside the mask, until the whole world seemed to be made out of the words.

'No!' Sanjira howled.

The silhouette shrank back. 'Yes, Cousin, yes. You see? The Grandfather's pleasure was to possess the biodata, to grow from its strength. Yet you threw the body away, without looking beneath its skin. Is there any sin worse than this?'

'Then... there's to be a punishment?'

The Grandfather's messenger didn't speak. It moved aside, melding with the shadows around it, letting Sanjira pass.

The Cousin stepped forward, his legs moving of their own accord. The room ahead was his own room, in the orphanage. In front of him there was a bed, and in the bed lay an eight-year-old boy. Cousin Sanjira heard the humming of the shrine in his ears, and knew the Spirits had brought him here. For the briefest of moments, Sanjira saw himself as the boy saw him, a figure in a blood-tainted robe, his face the skull of a bat. The Cousin moved to the side of the bed, and raised the knife. A scar of silver, unfolding from his gown.

This was his punishment, then. Cousin Sanjira, aged fifty, stabbed the boy clean through the heart. Young Sanjira, aged eight, cried out once and died.

But if Young Sanjira died, then Cousin Sanjira had never existed. Which meant he Couldn't have killed the boy. Which meant he did exist. Which meant he could have killed the boy. Which meant he'd never existed. Which meant he couldn't have killed the boy. Which meant he did exist. Which meant...

Cousin Sanjira murdered the child, and was himself murdered, again and again and again. He felt his life being disassembled and reassembled, disassembled and reassembled, disassembled and reassembled, until his timeline swallowed its own tail, and there was nothing left of him but divine and perfect Paradox.

6

THE BODYSNATCHERS [REPRISE]

The black ship re-entered normal space about a thousand kilometres above the surface of the Earth, on the very fringes of the planet's ionosphere. Its arrival sent shockwaves through the psychic aurora of the entire eastern hemisphere, causing people across India and Malaysia to see disturbing patterns in the static of their TV sets, and forcing images of impossible machines into the minds of Asia's leading research scientists. For weeks afterwards, the continent's New Agers would experience visions of bizarre planets made entirely out of crystal, but put it all down to something in the water.

The ship's scanning mechanisms surveyed the island that had once been called Borneo, finding the expected tachyon disturbances at the heart of the bio-engineered rainforest. In the control section of the vehicle, a two-pronged hand began wiring an invite card into the navigational banks, the pincers moving with surprising grace and precision.

A few minutes later, the vessel was brought into phase with Qixotl's Brigadoon circuit, and the Unthinkable City became visible to the ship's single occupant. Non-organic sensory systems monitored the buildings with a sensation that might, if the observer had been human, have been called excitement. The black spaceship promptly dropped into Earth's gravity well.

Sam peered along the corridor, but the decor was the same as far as the eye could see. Skulls, skulls, more skulls. She looked over her shoulder. Behind her, in the main part of the shrine, Kathleen was wandering around the raised section of the floor, looking completely thrown by the whole thing. Sam wondered whether there was some kind of reassurance she should have been giving the woman.

Then she remembered that Kathleen was about a decade older than she was. An officer in an international military organisation, for God's sake. Sam made a mental note to ask the Lieutenant what UNISYC stood for, the next time they had a moment to themselves.

She turned her attention back to the passage around her. The Faction's ship was a lot like the TARDIS, but more "open plan". The TARDIS was designed as a vehicle, with all the rooms and corridors stuffed into one handy little box; but the shrine was more like a set of rooms, capable of sliding into other people's architecture as it saw fit, a location rather than an object. The passage ahead was lined with blue lighting strips and dark ionic columns, the floor coated with muddy scratches and swirls.

Sam crouched down to inspect the markings. The darker lines looked like dried blood, but if it was real human bean-juice, a hell of a lot had been spilled here. Maybe the ship ran on the stuff, like in the stories the Doctor had told her about the Great Vampires. Maybe the skulls were the remains of the people the shrine had consumed. Yeuch.

'Hell,' said Kathleen.

Sam turned, and stood. Back in the shrine, Kathleen was standing frozen by the dais, staring at a second figure near the entrance. Before she'd even identified the shape, Sam had thrown herself against the wall of the passage, squeezing herself between two of the columns. There wasn't much light here, she reasoned, so she probably wasn't visible from the shrine.

She felt something press into her back, presumably the jawbone of one of the skulls. There was a vibration running through the skull, a humming of power. Sam held her breath. From the shrine, she could hear the sound of Kathleen's feet, skittering across the floor. And something else. Breathing. Heavy breathing. Whoever had arrived in the shrine, Sam concluded, he was wearing a mask.

'Don't touch me,' Kathleen said.

More skittering.

'I got lost, OK? Please. I'm sorry. I really, really don't want to be here.'

The breathing stopped. Sam guessed the mask had come off.

'I don't want to be here!' Kathleen yelled.

Against Sam's back, the skulls hummed a little more loudly. As if they knew the ship was about to be fed.

The Doctor dragged Mr Qixotl along the corridor, his fingers twisted around the man's ear lobe. Qixotl's legs were a little on the short side, so he practically had to skip down the tunnel to keep up with the Doctor. As he bounced from leg to leg, he made the occasional grunt of protest, but so far he hadn't bothered resisting.

'Now *ugh* let's try and be *nng* reasonable about this, OK?' Qixotl gurgled, as the Doctor hauled him around the next corner. 'I can see you're *ooh* upset, but, y'know, there's *ahg* no need to get nasty *rrp*.'

'Nasty?' The Doctor let go of the ear, then watched as Qixotl lost his balance, bounced off the wall, and fell onto his backside. 'You're selling off my own mortal remains, and you don't want me to get nasty?'

Qixotl rubbed the bruised parts of his anatomy, but didn't get up. 'Business is business,' he muttered.

The Doctor tried to remember the last time he'd been angry. Really, really angry. He couldn't. He'd been indignant, yes. And he'd often been a little snappish, since he'd acquired this body; the same way you could get a little snappish when you bought a new pair of shoes and found they didn't quite fit properly. But this was the first time he'd been *angry* angry in quite a while. Really, he was surprised how easy it seemed. Losing his temper seemed a much simpler process than it had done, say, half a decade ago. Another quirk of his new personality, he guessed. It was three-and-a-half years old, but he still hadn't looked in all the corners. So much in his head, these days, it could take him centuries to sort it all out.

He took a deep breath. 'Why, Qixotl?' he said. 'Why?'

The man shrugged. 'It's a valuable piece of biomass. Listen, if it's any consolation, there was a rigorous screening programme, right? Lots of races only wanted your stiff... I mean, your, er, earthly remnants... so they could gloat a bit. Everyone wants your head on a stick. I only invited the ones who had, y'know, a special use for it.'

It wasn't much of a consolation, really. The Doctor was starting to feel like a can of dog food. 'Then it's true, what you told me before? The Time Lords want to use me as a weapon of some kind?'

'Oh, yeah. They're desperate. Now some of the Celestis are going over to the other side, the war's going to hell in a handbasket -'

'Shh! Shh!' The Doctor closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears. 'I don't want to hear it. I don't want to know anything about the future.'

But then, knowing about the future was inevitable, wasn't it? To some degree, anyway. They were talking about his body. Which meant his future was already here, lying in a coffin-box, somewhere in the ziggurat.

So. This was it. His wake. A bunch of back-stabbing four-dimensional parasites, all trying to get their hands on whatever was left of his flesh and blood. He remembered that time on Necros, when he'd stumbled across his own tombstone. It had been a fake, of course, an elaborate practical joke, but it had set him thinking. Wondering whose face he'd be wearing when he was lowered into the ground. Wondering whether he'd make it to the end of the twelfth regeneration.

He could look, if he wanted.

Oh, good grief, no.

He opened his eyes. 'Are you sure it's me?' he asked.

Down on the floor, Qixotl nodded. 'Yup. Listen, if it helps, you're not going to snuff it until after -'

'Qixotl!'

'Sorry.'

'What I mean is, are you sure it isn't a forgery? A clone? A simulacrum?'

'You think I couldn't spot a clone, with all the biotech I've got around here? Anyhow, a clone wouldn't have the bits of biodata you've picked up over the years, it'd only have the inbuilt genetic stuff. Otherwise, I'd be selling a copy to everyone here. Sorry, Doc. Er, Doctor. My condo-

lences and everything.'

'It's underneath us,' the Doctor murmured. 'Down in the catacombs under the ziggurat. The voice I heard. A telepathic trace. That's why it didn't want to talk to me, because it knew... because *I* knew... I couldn't be allowed to communicate with myself. Not from beyond the grave.' A sudden thought struck him. 'Are you sure I'm dead?'

Qixotl laughed, then realised it was in bad taste, and pretended he'd been clearing his throat. 'Yeah, pretty sure.'

'But I'm still telepathically active. I know, I know, Time Lords are supposed to be active after death, residual psychic power and so forth, but to be that good a transmitter... maybe I'm feigning death. Maybe it's something to do with my respiratory bypass system. I've done it before.'

'You're hyperactive even as a corpse, Doctor. That's why you're worth so much, yeah?'

Corpse. The Doctor shuddered, but not visibly. Did the man really have to use that word? Body, he could deal with. Cadaver, even. But *corpse*...

'Where's the control centre of this City?' he growled.

Even he was amazed how threatening he sounded. Qixotl looked suitably startled. 'It's, er, on the next level down. But you can't go there.'

'The dead can go anywhere.' The Doctor raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'And I said I didn't believe in ghosts,' he said, addressing any major supernatural powers who might have been passing by.

At least the man looked human. When he'd crept into the shrine, he'd been wearing the bat-skull over his face, but now the mask was off. He was, Bregman judged, even younger than Cousin Justine had been. His skin was rough, tanned, pockmarked, pulled so tightly across his face that he seemed almost as skeletal as his headgear. He had dark hair, tied into a ponytail at the back of his head, and there was a small scar across his forehead. Bregman guessed it was self-inflicted. She remembered the videocasts she'd seen of the urban tribes in Little São Paulo, on the west coast of the Canadian Fed. Drop-outs who identified each other by the scars they wore. The man... Little Brother something... looked just like one of the gang-runners, Brazilian features and all. Only his eyes didn't fit the stereotype. Pale blue. Aryan blue. Contacts, maybe.

The Little Brother kept moving forward. Bregman kept backing away. He was taller than she was, and probably combat-trained. His clothes weren't ideal for action – he looked really, really uncomfortable in that suit – but then, Bregman's body wasn't ideal for action, either.

'*I don't want to be here!*' she squawked. Then her heel caught against something on the floor behind her, and she tumbled backwards.

After a few moments, Bregman found herself staring up at the pitch-black ceiling of the shrine. Her backside ached more than her backbone, so at least it had been a good fall. There was a wet patch under her hand, as if she'd fallen into a puddle.

The face of the Faction cultist materialised above her head. A smile stretched itself across his lips. The smile made his mouth look like another ceremonial scar.

'You on the slab,' he drawled.

Bregman twisted her head to one side. She realised she was lying on the dais at the centre of the chamber. From here, she could make out the details of the rust patterns, geometric figures that looked as though they'd leaked straight out of someone's veins. She figured out why her hand was wet, at last.

'Blood,' she said.

'No blood,' the Little Brother told her, the smile-wound opening up a little. 'Biomass. We take that from one of the Corp'ration. Took a whole day, cutting that son-of-a-bitch open.'

'Oh, God,' Bregman croaked. The Time Lord, Homunculette, had said something about Faction Paradox being a voodoo cult. Voodoo was illegal in most parts of the world these days, after what had happened in Haiti in the '40s, and most of what Bregman knew came from the old schlock movies. Voodoo ritual involved the use of biological matter, everybody knew that. You used people's hair and toenail clippings to cast spells against them. You used blood to activate the magic.

That was it. The shrine was alive. Bregman had read the tech reports, she knew all about the "living technology" the aliens used, the organic ships of the Zygons, the thinker-weapons of the

Selachians. The shrine was a ship with a mind of its own. If human beings had built a place like this, it would've been full of computer banks and navigational systems, but the Faction did things differently. The only way you could communicate with the shrine was through the blood rites, and Bregman was lying on top of the control panel. Sacrifice a chicken and you're on your way.

'I don't want to be here,' Bregman hollered. 'It was a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

'You *are* here, UNISYC bitch. This, s'our shrine. You don't come here. Just me, my Cousin, and the Spirits. Anyone else, that's sac-ree-lege.' He didn't sound like he was outraged by the blasphemy, though. He sounded like he thought it was all a big joke.

Bregman decided to chance her arm. Oh, great. Hell of an expression to think of, at a time like this. 'What do you want?'

The Little Brother stopped smiling. He reached into the top pocket of his jacket. 'Satisfaction,' he said.

'You want to keep the Spirits happy, is that it?'

'Spirits. Huhuh. You think I'm gonna be like a witch-doctor, like *Tarzan*? You think I'm gonna wave my unga-bunga stick at you, turn you into a dog? You already a dog. UNI-bitch.' He took his hand out of his pocket. Bregman saw there was something attached to it. It looked a lot like a knuckleduster, but much more intricate, the product of a higher technology. There was a tiny glass vial connected to each finger.

As Bregman watched, spines extended from the vials. Needles. Syringes, maybe. Four of them in all.

The Little Brother inspected the device, then turned to Bregman. 'Want something from you,' he said. 'Then I go let you run. Hokay?'

Colonel Joseph Armitage KorteZ was getting close to Cloud Nine. He knew this for a fact, because he'd been careful to count the Clouds as he'd passed them. The advantage of the military mind, he reasoned. Just because you were going to have an out-of-body experience, that was no excuse for sloppiness.

He'd been ascending the various levels of existence for about half an hour now, all the while meditating on the events of the auction. As he passed through Cloud Seven, he was assailed by false angels, tiny white-winged goblins with faces stolen from the other representatives in the zig-gurat. One of the creatures, adopting the features of the man in the green velvet jacket, twittered around the Colonel's head.

'Sergeant... *Colonel* KorteZ!' he exclaimed. 'Still reading up on the Zen Buddhism?'

'I don't know you,' KorteZ told him.

'Oh, I'm sure you do,' the man said. 'Don't you remember Saskatoon?'

'KorteZ!' It was another of the angels. It looked like Mr Qixotl, but it sounded more like General Tchike. 'Don't you know your duty, Colonel? There's a traitor in our midst. A threat to the security of Earth. Deal with him at once.'

Two other angels, skeletal bats with doves' feathers stuck to their wings, fluttered past. 'The Spirits are with us,' one announced, joyously. 'But we had orders to capture those thermosystron bombs, not destroy them.'

'Si,' affirmed the other.

'The strange is truthor than you think,' said Mr Homunculette. 'The schoolgirl is not what she seems.'

'But sometimes my arms bend back,' added one particularly angelic angel with an unfolding face.

'Who would live in a body like this?' asked the Doctor.

Doctor? Where had he come from?

KorteZ decided the angels had probably been sent as a distraction by the Infernal Forces of Creation, so he was glad to find himself drifting out of their reach. But Cloud Eight was next, and if anything, it was going to be even worse. The realm of dreams, KorteZ knew. Full of broken images, random associations.

'There's something you have to know,' said the Doctor.

The spirit of Colonel KorteZ uttered the strongest cursemantra he knew. The Doctor, again. The memory of the man had followed him up from Cloud Seven. The Doctor was different to the way

the Colonel remembered him, taller and older. The details were unclear, though, as the Time Lord was wearing a shroud over his head.

'We are all of us living inside the bottle,' the Doctor explained, while the worms of the astral plane began eating away his flesh. 'And one day, the bottle will break. Then all worlds will be one world. The inside will meet the outside.'

'But what about the auction?' asked Kortez.

The Doctor considered this. 'I don't know. What have you got to offer?'

Kortez puffed out his chest, or at least, the part of his higher life-essence that was currently pretending to be his chest. 'I'm not concerned about my bid, Doctor. It's the other representatives I'm thinking of.'

The Doctor nodded. His shroud bobbed up and down. 'For the record, most of them will be offering information. Technical data. Weapons specifications.'

'Is that all?' Kortez felt a swelling of pride in his pseudo-chest. 'Then I have no reason for concern. What I have to offer Mr Qixotl is greater than any material reward.'

'Really? What's that?'

'What's up on Cloud Nine,' Kortez replied. He very nearly smiled when he said it.

After a while, Cousin Justine had grown tired of squinting at the cracks in the walls. So she'd searched the rooms of the ziggurat for a better medium of communication, finally finding the newspaper in the anteroom. She opened it at the TV page, which supplied her with a listing of tonight's programmes on the Bornean National Channel.

Television. She remembered that from Dronid. Fragmented pictures. Human faces, like her own. Bodies full of life, dancing to alien rhythms. Fabulous and incomprehensible.

20:00 News and weather.

20:10 The Week in Sport, inc. InterCam results service.

20:30 Evening movie. *Harvey* (1950), in ReMode 3D where available. Classic comedy starring James Stewart. Hello again, Cousin Justine. Are you well? You seem distracted.

Cousin Justine nodded formally. 'I'm perfectly fine, Mr Shift. Thank you.'

22:30 Culture shock?

Justine felt herself bite her lip. 'Is it really so obvious?'

22:45 Only to me, I should think.

'Good. Now. We were discussing the new arrival. You're concerned?'

23:05 I'm suspicious. I picked up a few of his notions, when he arrived. Did you know he's a Time Lord?

Cousin Justine didn't know, and the news surprised her. 'I understood Mr Homunculette was here on behalf of Gallifrey.'

23:50 He is. Which begs the question, where does this interloper come from? One of the newblood Houses?

'Don't trust him,' said a voice.

Justine looked up from the newspaper, to see an unfamiliar outline stumbling into the anteroom. It was a man. Or had been, once. He walked with slow, heavy strides, as if worried his legs might fall off if he moved too fast. Apart from her eyes, all Justine's senses told her there was no one in the room except her and the Shift. At least, no one living.

'The Time Lord. Don't trust him. He killed me. Killed. Me.'

'You're beautiful,' Justine whispered.

The man stared at her, without feeling. Justine knew what she'd said, and knew how undignified it must have sounded, but it was the simple truth. This man was pure, the way only the dead could be pure. In him, everything the family had taught Cousin Justine to respect was made flesh.

'Not important,' the man said. 'Listen to me. The Time Lord. He killed me. I know him. I'm sure. He's -'

He didn't get the chance to finish the sentence. A cluster of gangling limbs rushed out of the corridor and into the anteroom, knocking the dead man to one side, and he keeled over, without any kind of complaint. Before Justine could even catch her breath, something was moving towards her face at high speed. She ducked. A blur of silver slapped the air above her head.

Homunculette. He'd bolted into the room, moving faster than someone as sickly-looking as him

should have been able to move. Cousin Justine saw a snarl on his face, a wedge of metal in his hand. She felt the Shift stumbling around inside her head, looking for some way of communicating with her, but there was no way for it to manifest itself. All Justine could see was Homunculette, a ragbag of expletives and bony limbs, doing his best to smash his weapon into the side of her skull.

Sam shouted. Kathleen didn't respond. The Lieutenant looked alert, but she seemed to be listening to something else entirely.

Sam finally caught up with her in one of the ziggurat's deeper corridors, near a stairway that presumably led to the basement level. Kathleen tried to hurl herself down the steps, but Sam managed to grab her shoulders before she could make it. She pulled Kathleen back into the corridor, where the woman slid to the floor, and finally stopped moving. Exhausted, at last.

Sam knelt down by her side. Finding Kathleen hadn't been easy. Sam had stayed hidden in the passage of the Faction's shrine, while Little Brother Manjuele had performed his "interrogation" in what had sounded like an Americanised South American accent. Finally, there'd been a noise Sam hadn't recognised. It hadn't sounded nice.

Kathleen and Manjuele had left the shrine together. Sam had waited a minute or two, then scarpered after them. Out in the corridors of the ziggurat, there'd been no sign of the Faction cultist, but after a while Sam had found Bregman again, hurtling down a torchlit passage into the guts of the building.

Bregman's face was pressed against the floor now. Sam tried to get her attention. 'Kathleen?'

No reply.

'Kathleen? What happened?'

No reply.

'Can you hear me? What did he do to you?'

Instantly, Kathleen's arm shot out from underneath her. Sam blinked. The woman was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, so the limb was bare from the shoulder down, and the marks along her forearm were in plain view. Four small dots, the colour of burnt flesh. Like someone had attacked Kathleen with a hole-punch.

'I gave Manjuele what he wanted,' Kathleen said, flatly.

Hmm. That sounded ominous. 'And what *did* he want?'

Kathleen finally looked up. Not at Sam, though. She was staring into the alcove, where the stairway was set.

'Can you hear him?' she said.

Startled, Sam looked around, half-expecting to see the Little Brother creeping up on them. There was nobody in sight. 'He says he can make it stop,' Kathleen went on. 'He says there's no need to be afraid. He says he's the one the monsters are afraid of. He can make them go away. There's evil in the universe. Some things must be fought.'

Oh, hell, she was really losing it now. 'Listen to me, Kathleen. You're delirious. I don't know what's been done to you, but...' Sam stopped talking. She knew no one was listening.

Kathleen unfolded her limbs, and started pulling herself upright. 'He says I don't have to worry about anything. Not even Displacer Syndrome.'

Sam put her hands around the Lieutenant's shoulders, more as a gesture of support than to help her up. 'Displacer Syndrome?' she queried.

'Displacer Syndrome. Displacer Syndrome.' Kathleen practically sang the words. 'UNISYC personnel are fifteen times more likely to commit suicide than the average human being. Did you know that?'

She seemed to be addressing the stairway. Sam shook her head.

'I'm coming,' Kathleen concluded. Then she broke free of Sam's grip, and threw herself down the stairs.

The Doctor hadn't spoken in ages. He'd strolled along the corridor to the security centre without a second's hesitation, Qixotl in tow, and nothing had tried to stop him. The defensive systems should have identified him as foreign matter, Qixotl reminded himself, should have ripped him to pieces. Maybe one of the circuits had messed up again.

Or maybe the stories about the Doctor were true. They said he'd been able to wander through death-traps without a scratch, while he'd been alive. Which kind of contradicted the stories about how he'd died, but there you go.

The Doctor didn't even stop in his tracks when he saw the full horror of the security centre. He headed straight for the master console, and the pixscreen obediently unfolded itself from the surface at his touch. Qixotl glanced at one of the tapestries on the far wall, the one depicting the sentient dinosaur sawing the heads off the vestal virgins. The dinosaur's eyes were leering in Qixotl's direction, as if to say, "you've lost the plot, sunshine".

The Doctor was busy prodding the controls by the time Qixotl reached the console, the pixscreen cycling through the schematics of the ziggurat. Eventually, the Doctor found a map of the lowest level, and the screen showed him the complex crisscross of traps protecting the Relic. The body itself, in its sealed casket, was indicated by a point of solid silver light.

The Doctor stared at it. And stared. And stared.

'Erm...' Qixotl prompted.

'I don't understand,' the Doctor muttered.

Qixotl looked up at the tapestry again. Even the vestal virgins were laughing at him, now. 'Why?' the Doctor went on. 'Why would the Time Lords need my body so badly? Homunculette's an agent of the High Council, he's not here to make sure I get a decent burial.'

'It's like I said, Gallifrey needs your biodata codes. It's the war.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'What's so special about my biodata? All Time Lords have the same sort of thing in their biology. I know I've got more practical experience than most of the others, and there's still that little question of my ancestry to be cleared up, but even so...'

Mr Qixotl wondered how much he could say without the Doctor having a go at him for "damaging the delicate web of space-time". 'All right, it's like this. At the start of the war, Gallifrey lost a lot of stuff, yeah? Most of its secrets got scrubbed by the...' The Doctor gave him a warning glance. '...by the enemy. I mean, I'll tell you this much, those sods can wipe out information as fast as they can wipe out matter. Most of the Time Lords' big guns got taken out. The Demat Gun, the Sash of Rassilon, the works. You know how much the High Council's technology relies on biodata codes, right? Most of the biodata codes went, too.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I'm an ex-President of the High Council. I've got all the codes they need.'

'Yup. And not just that.' Qixotl paused. 'Listen, I'll try not to give too much away here, but... between now and the time when you, y'know, finally kick the bucket... other stuff happens to you. I mean, you might think you've got a lot of weird bits in your biodata now, but wait until the... the end.' Qixotl wiped his brow with the sleeve of his jacket. This had to be the hardest conversation of his life. 'Your body's got all kinds of secrets stuffed into its biodata. Things the Time Lords have lost. And when I say lost, I mean, totally.'

The Doctor considered this for a few moments. 'They could go back in time. Get hold of the information they need before it was destroyed by the enemy.'

'Nope. Doesn't work. The enemy's fighting a four-dimensional war here. The two sides are in a, what d'you call it, a temporal stalemate. They're blocking off whole chunks of history to each other.'

The Doctor looked appalled. 'Then the enemy must know as much about temporal mechanics as the Time Lords do. I don't think I wanted to know that.'

'Uh. Anyhow. Gallifrey can't get in touch with its own past, but technically, you're not part of Gallifrey's past. Not any more. You're a renegade, you're an independent. Too tricky to put a time blockade on. Besides, your body's more powerful than anyone else's, they reckon.'

The Doctor held up his hand, motioning Qixotl to stop talking. 'All right. I don't want to know how the war starts, and I don't want to know who the enemy is. Are. Will be. But you can tell me one more thing. Who are the Celestis?'

Qixotl looked around the chamber. He wasn't sure why. In case there were any spies hanging around in the corners, he supposed. 'The Celestis are Time Lords,' he said. 'The ones who saw the war coming. I mean, according to Homunculette, the High Council got taken by surprise when it all started. They've got that gizmo on Gallifrey for predicting the future...'

'The Matrix,' the Doctor said. Qixotl nodded. Actually, he'd known full well what it was called, but he didn't want to look like he knew too much.

'Yeah, that. But the Matrix only makes guesses, right? Because the Time Lords aren't allowed to peek into the future, not properly. And anyway, the enemy are time-active, so the Matrix didn't see 'em coming. Something to do with non-linearity. But get this. A bunch of high-ranking Time Lords outside the High Council still figured out the war was going to happen, don't ask me how. And they got scared, because, y'know, if the enemy kill you, they don't just kill you. They make sure you never existed in the first place. So this bunch of Time Lords decided to get out, the only way they could.'

The Doctor's attention was fixed on him now. Which was a good job, Qixotl realised, because it meant he hadn't noticed the way the pixscreen had changed. It now displayed a simple 2D image of the ziggurat roof. A small black speck had appeared in the sky above the building.

Qixotl kept talking. 'Anyhow. This bunch of Time Lords... they call themselves the Celestis, right?... decided to get one over on the enemy. Really smart move, they made.'

The Doctor crossed his arms, as if to say "talk faster". 'Which was?'

'They wiped themselves from the continuum. I mean, completely.'

'What?'

'Yup. The Celestis took themselves out of space and time. Scratched out all traces of them ever existing in the physical universe. Beating the enemy to it, kind of.'

'That doesn't make sense,' said the Doctor.

'Yeah, it does. Because – and this is the clever bit – when they took themselves out of reality like that, they put themselves on, y'know, another plane of existence. They kind of stopped being real, and turned into... ideas. Because you can kill a person, but you can't kill an idea. Get it?' Qixotl shot a quick glance at the pixscreen. The spaceship was growing larger by the second, its outline slowly filling the sky above the ziggurat. Qixotl hoped the Doctor wouldn't see it. He'd probably recognise the design, the smug git.

The Doctor, however, looked like he was a million miles away. 'I'm not sure I understand. The Celestis are Time Lords who put themselves into conceptual space?' His eyes widened, and he slapped himself on the forehead. 'You mean, like the Shift?'

Qixotl squirmed. 'Erm, well... I'm not really supposed to tell anyone who the Shift's working for...'

'I see.' The Doctor nodded. 'Removal from the material plane. Using the same kind of technology that put the Land of Fiction together, I'd imagine. Ingenious. Totally mad, of course, but... Celestis?' He was talking to himself now, Qixotl realised. 'The Celestial Intervention Agency? It's their level of insanity...'

He stopped murmuring, and glared at Qixotl, who quickly took his eyes off the pixscreen. 'So. The Time Lords need my body to stand a chance of survival. But you've decided to sell it to the highest bidder.'

'It's like I said. The laws of economics. Business is –'

'I know what you said!' Instinctively, Qixotl ducked. The Doctor hadn't actually thrown a punch, but the outburst had almost been violent enough to leave a bruise. 'Do you have any idea what sort of fire you're playing with? The fate of my corpse could determine the fate of the entire life-line. This auction could turn out to be the most important event in the entire history of sentient life.'

Mr Qixotl cleared his throat. 'Y'know, I was just thinking of my interests...'

'Faction Paradox! The Time Lords! The Celestis! What are you expecting to happen? Do you think they're all going to sit down around a table and talk about this politely?'

'Well, yeah, actually. Look, Doctor, I don't think you understand the kind of profit margins we're talking about here.'

'Profits! Profits! You're playing with the Web of Time, and all you care about is how Time Lord biomass is doing on the FT index!' The Doctor threw his arms wide, as if to call upon some ancient and terrible god of rhetoric. 'If you're so determined to put the whole universe in jeopardy, why didn't you go the whole hog? Why didn't you just invite the Daleks?'

Immediately, Mr Qixotl's eyes shot back to the pixscreen. The Doctor noticed, this time, and turned to see what he was looking at.

The black spaceship had touched down on top of the ziggurat, its underbelly flattening most the roof garden. The Doctor turned back to Qixotl, an expression of absolute horror on his face.

'You didn't,' he said.
Mr Qixotl tried to look apologetic.

7

SURPRISED?

Cousin Justine knew her arms were in the wrong position before she even saw the wrench swinging back towards her face. In her own time, on her own planet, even the word “physical” had been considered slightly obscene, but the training on Dronid had erased the old stigma. She wasn’t ashamed of her body any more. She knew the subtle equations that governed close-quarter combat, knew how to move *with* the opponent as well as *against* him.

So she knew there was no way on Earth she could stop the wrench before it smashed into the side of her skull. In the half-second she judged she had left before the impact, Justine told the Grandfather what was happening, and respectfully asked him to prepare a place for her at the family table. Naturally, the Grandfather didn’t deign to reply.

The wrench jerked in Homunculette’s hand. The rhythm was broken. The flow of the combat changed in an instant.

Justine rearranged her limbs without a moment’s hesitation, readying herself for a counter-strike. Little Brother Manjuele was standing behind Homunculette, gripping the Time Lord’s wrist with both hands. Justine hadn’t noticed the Little Brother come into the room; he hadn’t been part of the flow until now, he hadn’t even been a consideration. Homunculette didn’t seem to notice Manjuele was there. His eyes were still fixed on Cousin Justine, as if he couldn’t understand why the wrench wasn’t connecting with her head.

Justine punched him in the throat. Homunculette gagged, then dropped the weapon. Justine lashed out again, barrel-punching his neck. Homunculette didn’t look hurt when he dropped to the ground. Irritated, but not hurt.

‘Thank you, Little Brother,’ Justine said, once she’d caught her breath.

Manjuele gave her a quick salute, and a grin broke out across his face. Justine tried not to think of it as a *nasty* grin. In her own time, before the Faction had found her, she would have considered Manjuele to be the lowest form of human life, a creature that had never even stood a chance of getting close to the Grace of God. One of the criminal classes, and worse than that, a foreigner. Living proof that Mr Darwin was nearer to the truth than Justine’s elders had wanted to admit.

The Faction had reconditioned her, of course. They’d taught her that all beings were as one in the eyes of the Grandfather, that the real *haves* were those who’d found the Spirits, and the real *haven’ts* were those who still believed in the deceptions of the Time Lords. But every now and then, a little piece of England would find its way into her thoughts, and she’d wonder what her family – her first family, her old family, her genetic family – would have said about the Little Brother. She’d tried dressing him up like a gentleman, but that was the only concession she’d made to her past.

‘I can’t get up,’ said Trask.

Justine turned. Trask was lying on his side near the doorway of the anteroom, his limbs perfectly stiff. He’d fallen like a skittle, though he didn’t seem upset.

Manjuele sniggered. Justine shot him a warning glance.

‘Dead joints,’ Trask told them. ‘Not flexible.’

The Doctor hopped up the last few steps of the stairway, and found the gloom of the ziggurat giving way to the (frankly miserable) daylight of the rainforest. The roof of the building was smooth and flat, a square of off-yellow stone sixty feet or so along each side. Qixotl had done his best to turn the area into a pleasant little garden, compensating for the lack of soil by planting the flowers in bubbles of hydroponic liquid, which floated around the place on tiny antigrav cushions. The bubbles were very well behaved, never floating above eye level or wandering over the edge of the roof.

There was also a large puddle of liquid in the middle of the garden, where the black spaceship

had touched down and squashed all the bubbles underneath it. Some people had no respect for horticulture, the Doctor told himself.

Mr Qixotl appeared at his side, breathing heavily after the run up the three flights of stairs. As soon as he saw the ship, the man started straightening his tie and brushing the dirt off his lapels. The Doctor gave him a pitying look.

'No excuse for looking shabby,' Qixotl sniffed.

'I don't think they'll care much about your fashion sense,' the Doctor told him, matter-of-factly. 'Not unless you're wearing a personal energy dispersion field and three-inch-thick armour plating.'

Qixotl looked defiant, for once. 'There's not going to be any trouble here, y'know. Anyone attending the auction has to abide by strict rules of non-hostility, it says so on the invite cards. Absolutely no high-technology weapons allowed in the City, except for those that can't be separated from their owners' bodies.' He indicated the ship with a wave of his hand. 'Er... their guns are detachable, aren't they?'

The Doctor shook his head. It was hard to believe even Qixotl could be this absurd. 'And how are you going to enforce these rules of non-hostility, precisely?'

'Not a problem, believe me. The City looks after that kind of thing itself.'

'Damping fields?'

'Yup. Energy weapons and combustive artefacts don't function properly inside City limits. Except for cigarette lighters, obviously. Listen, I know how nervous you must be right now. The guys... I mean, the clients on that ship aren't going to be too pleased to see you here, yeah? Maybe, y'know, you should get out of the way while you can.'

The Doctor wondered if that was supposed to be a threat. 'If the Daleks really are here, I want to be around to keep an eye on them. Don't worry, I'm quite good at making sure they don't kill me. I've had plenty of experience. Some of it quite recent.'

'What d'you mean, "if" the Daleks are really here? That's a Dalek ship, right?'

The Doctor took another look at the vessel that had parked itself on the roof. He hadn't paid much attention to the design before now, mainly because it wasn't very nice. Conventional spaceships weren't much to his liking anyway, but the black ship was little more than an ugly lump of metal with ion engines welded to the underside. 'I don't recognise the shape,' he admitted. 'But black is a very Dalek colour. Let me think. Late twenty-first century... by now, most of the Daleks are scattered around the edges of Mutters' Spiral, trying to build up a decent galactic powerbase. The ones who got left behind on Skaro are just starting to think about putting together their own little empire. The "static electricity" phase of Dalek development, if I'm not mistaken. Still, my Dalek history's always been a bit rusty. It wouldn't be so bad if it didn't keep changing all the time.'

Qixotl's response to all this was drowned out by an unpleasant clanking sound from the bowels of the spaceship. As the Doctor watched, a section of the hull detached itself from the ship's body. A hatch-cum-gangway, although the mechanism was so clumsy, it made the craft look like it was falling apart at the seams when it opened out. A few dozen more flower-bubbles popped under the gangway's weight as it thumped against the ziggurat roof.

There was a long pause.

Nothing happened.

'I think they're waiting for us to go to them,' the Doctor said, out of the corner of his mouth.

Qixotl did another one of his little nervous shuffles. 'Erm... Doctor, you do realise that if we go onto the ship, the City systems can't protect us?'

'Oh, yes.'

'But then again, why would they want to hurt us, right? If they kill us, they won't get hold of your... they won't get hold of the Relic.'

'True,' said the Doctor, cheerily. 'Unless they torture us to find out how to bypass your security systems *before* they kill us.'

The pause returned. And this time, it brought some of its friends along with it.

'After you,' said Qixotl.

'Fair enough,' said the Doctor, and strolled towards the gangway, waving a few of the flower-bubbles out of his path as he walked.

Bump.

Bregman felt her head crack against one of the steps. She tried raising her hands to protect her face, but her arms were twisted behind her back. At least, she guessed her arms were twisted behind her back. She couldn't actually feel them, though, so they could have been anywhere.

Bump bump.

That might have been her shoulder breaking. Bregman didn't notice the pain, particularly. She was too busy concentrating on the voice. It was the same voice she'd heard when she'd first arrived at the ziggurat, not exactly inside her head, not exactly outside her head. It was louder now. She guessed she was getting closer to its source.

Bump. Bump bump. Bump.

Sam was somewhere above her... below her... whichever way was up... trotting down the steps and calling out her name. Kathleen. The name sounded funny, for some reason. No one called her Kathleen any more. She was Bregman. Or, Lieutenant. Or, Miss Chicken-Legs, to the rest of the staff at Geneva.

Bump bump.

When had she stopped being Kathleen and started being Bregman? No, look, that wasn't important now, and besides, the voice was telling her not to worry about it. It was staring into her eyes (yeah, so voices couldn't actually stare, so what?), smiling gently (and they couldn't smile, either, but again, so what?). All she had to do, the voice explained, was reach its body. It needed company. Human company. It had a message, from the future, but only a human being would be able to understand it.

No more bumps.

She'd reached a landing, on the first floor below ground level. The stone underneath her was spattered with blood, probably her own. For a moment, she lost track of the voice, and that was when she noticed the pain. The nerves started untwisting in her shoulders and legs. She felt blood trickling over her lips. For the first time since she'd started falling, she seriously considered screaming in agony.

But then the voice spoke again. Down, it insisted. The next level down. Bregman peered across the landing, and saw the steps stretching out in front of her. She heard Sam stepping onto the landing behind her, breathing heavily.

'What are you -' Sam began, but she shut up when Bregman threw herself down the next flight of stairs.

Cousin Justine ordered Manjuele to help get Trask onto his feet, which didn't exactly put the little Brother in a good mood. Manjuele got a good whiff of the dead guy's BO while he was doing it. The stiff didn't smell of putrefaction or old meat or anything, but it wasn't a nice experience. Like sniffing chemicals. Kind of flat. Kind of stale.

Trask didn't even thank him, once he was up and about. He just said something about the Time Lord being dangerous, then stomped out through the doorway. Justine kept her eyes fixed on the zombie as he lurched off down the corridor. She looked like she was going to start slobbering any minute.

Wouldn't that be typical, thought Manjuele, if she had the hots for a stiff? Bitch must have thought she was too good for anyone living and breathing. He'd been trying to get into the Cousin's pants for months, first by playing the humble-but-obedient servant, then resorting to the old rough-but-good-natured-street-urchin act. So far, no progress. Sure, she was his Cousin, she was supposed to be his elder in the family, but what the hell?

'Got a present for you,' he said.

Justine noticed him, at last. Manjuele stuck his hand into his pocket, and pulled it out with the biosampler wrapped around the knuckles. He waved it in front of the Cousin's eyes, so she could see how full the collection valves were.

'Human girl,' he said. 'Found her in the shr-'

'No.' Justine put her finger to her lips. 'Not here.'

Manjuele looked over his shoulder. Homunculette lay on the floor at the other side of the room, face-down in a puddle of his own spit. The Time Lord wasn't unconscious, as such, but his senses weren't going to be doing much work for the next couple of minutes. Justine had gone straight for

the major neck nerves. They were big on Time Lord anatomy, back on Dronid. 'Don't worry 'bout him. He's not gonna hear a thing.'

'Not him.' Justine closed her eyes for a moment. Showing off, Manjuele thought, trying to look all serene and mystical. Bitch. 'The Shift isn't here. Good.'

'Human girl,' Manjuele repeated. 'Found her down in the shrine. Lucky us.' The biosampler wouldn't work in the City, Manjuele had been told, but the shrine wasn't really part of the City, because it was in another dimension, or something like that. He didn't understand the technical stuff, but the principle was easy to figure out. The shrine was family territory. On family territory, you could do what you liked to outsiders, same as in little São Paulo. He could've done more to the UNISYC bitch than taken a biodata sample, but he hadn't been in the mood. Too skinny for him, anyhow.

'How good a sample did you get?' asked Justine.

'Deep as it gets. Deep as I could without ripping her up.'

'Enough for a control rite?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. Things are getting out of hand.' She glanced at the wrench, the one Homunculette had dropped on the floor of the anteroom. 'We may need another agent, soon.'

'Whatever,' said Manjuele. On the other side of the room, Homunculette started moving again, so Manjuele crossed over to him and stamped on his head.

The interior of the ship was black. Pitch black. Qixotl guessed he was standing in a short passage, maybe an airlock tunnel, but the walls were sucking up the light from outside the hatch before it could reach his eyes. He'd waited a good two minutes before he'd followed the Doctor into the guts of the ship, waiting to see if there'd be a heart-wrenching scream from inside. Obviously, there hadn't been.

'Interesting,' said the Doctor. He was a little way in front of Qixotl, probably at the end of the tunnel.

Oh, great. Trust *him* to get enthusiastic, all of a sudden. 'Why isn't there any light in here?' Qixotl mumbled.

'Mmm? Oh, there is. The walls are luminescent.'

'They're black, Doctor.'

'Yes. Luminescent black. Humanoid eyes can't pick up the frequencies.'

Qixotl remembered how the guest room he'd prepared for the Daleks had looked. The room had been black, as well, the walls covered with bumps and nodules Qixotl hadn't understood the purpose of at all. He'd hoped, really really hoped, they hadn't been anything to do with sex. There were some things he didn't want to have to imagine.

'Yeah, well, my eyes are pretty much humanoid at the moment, and I'd kind of prefer it if I could see where I was going, y'know?' he murmured.

'Don't worry. There should be a secondary lighting system on board somewhere. When they see we're coming... hmm. Now, that really is interesting.'

Qixotl realised the Doctor was going to keep saying "interesting" until someone asked him what he was talking about. OK, whatever made him happy. 'What's up?'

'Touch the walls.'

Qixotl hesitated. 'I'm not going to get a shock or anything, am I?'

'Just touch them.'

Nervously, Qixotl extended a hand, and brushed the nearest wall of the tunnel. It was cold. Very cold. There was even a thin layer of frost on the surface.

'That isn't frost,' the Doctor said, making Qixotl wonder if the psychic dampers he'd had planted in his skull were playing up. At least three of the powers he'd invited to the auction were known to have rudimentary telepathic abilities, so the dampers had seemed like a wise precaution.

Qixotl scraped some of the not-frost off the wall, and crunched it between his fingers. 'More like crystal, right?'

'Stand back. I'm going to open this door.'

'Er, what door?'

There was a high-pitched squealing sound, followed by a drawn-out mechanical groaning. Even in the blackness, Qixotl could make out the wall at the end of the tunnel irising open. There was a wider area on the other side of the opening, presumably the control section of the ship, although it was too dark to be certain.

A squat pillar-box shape stood in the middle of the opening, a dark silhouette about the same height as Mr Qixotl. For one horrifying moment, Qixotl saw himself as a cyborg might see him, a contour map of heat traces and biological functions.

'Interesting,' the Doctor said, irritatingly. 'Here. Come and see.'

Qixotl didn't move. 'Doctor, look, I don't think you should... y'know...'

'Oh, there's nothing to be worried about. It's quite dead.'

'Dead? You're sure?'

'I'm sure. Take a look.'

So Qixotl took a look.

In fact, when he was within spitting distance of the shape, he even convinced himself to reach out and touch it. The surface of the thing was as cold as the wall had been, and coated with the same kind of crystal-frost. Qixotl couldn't be sure, in this light, but he couldn't see the tell-tale markings of a member of the Dalek race. No eye-stalk, no sucker-arm, no bumpy bits around the base. 'Is it a...?' he began.

'I don't know.' Qixotl sensed the Doctor was frowning. 'It was alive, or partly alive. A life-form with an outer metallic shell and an organic interior. But in this state, it's impossible to say for certain what species it belonged to.'

Qixotl kept prodding the surface of the shape. He felt the dome at the top of its body crack under his fingers. 'What happened to it?'

'Its cellular structure has been totally reconfigured. The outer shell's brittle, the casing's been turned into semi-solid crystal. There, you feel that?' The Doctor grabbed Qixotl's hand, and forced him to stroke one side of the dead thing's body. Qixotl felt an enormous hole there. 'Something's forced its way into the interior and extracted the biomass inside.'

Qixotl pulled his hand away. 'What are you saying here, Doctor?'

The Doctor patted the corpse on the top of its dome. 'I don't know whether this started out life as a Dalek or not. But whatever it was, it's effectively been peeled and eaten.'

Kathleen was still moving, in spite of the obvious minor injuries. Sam was out of breath by the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, but the Lieutenant, who'd effectively taken the non-tiring way down, still seemed quite active. There was blood all over her face, and the stuff was still seeping out of the cuts on her forehead. The way she crawled, Sam guessed most of her joints had been twisted out of position.

Sam trotted up the corridor ahead of her, and stopped right in the woman's path. Kathleen came to a halt at her feet. Her face was terrifying. Battered stupid, but still determined as hell. She looked like she'd just seen the oasis on the horizon.

'He's here,' Kathleen croaked.

Sam crossed her arms. 'Kathleen, you've just bounced down two flights of stairs on your head. You're lucky you didn't break your neck.'

'No. He wouldn't. He wouldn't let it happen.'

'Who wouldn't?'

'The voice,' said Kathleen.

She was listening out for something, Sam realised. So she listened, too. I never give advice, never, thought Sam. But there are terrible things in the universe, things that... wait a minute, she was thinking rubbish. Concentrate, she told herself. You're getting distracted. But if you could touch the alien sand, and hear the cry of strange birds, and watch them wheel in another sky, then we'll burn that bridge when we come to it, until it seems that I'm some kind of galactic yo-yo...

'Can you hear it?' Kathleen asked.

Sam suddenly remembered what the Doctor had said, when they'd been exploring the ziggurat together. 'Are you psychic, at all?'

The corridor opened out a few metres ahead of them. The room at the end seemed darker than

the other parts of the ziggurat Sam had seen. Kathleen had already slithered past her, and now she was getting close to the entrance, slowly pulling herself to her feet. Sam hurried after her.

The room ahead was, in short, a vault. It wasn't as bad as the Faction's shrine, but it was getting there. The walls were the colour of soot, made out of what looked like slime-encrusted brick. Huge rusting nails had been hammered into the blocks, and hung with iron chains for no particular reason. It was supposed to look like a dungeon, Sam realised. The torches only seemed to illuminate the edges of the room, leaving a great puddle of darkness at the dead centre of the chamber.

And in the middle of the darkness was a casket. It glowed, but the glow only lit the box itself; the light somehow failed to reach the space around it. The casket was silver, roughly the same size and shape as a coffin. Its sides were perfectly smooth, its lid engraved with two carefully carved symbols. Sam recognised them as Greek letters, but wasn't sure which Greek letters they were, exactly. The second one was probably "sigma", though.

It was the Relic. You could tell. You could tell, because everything in the ziggurat seemed to lead here, to this precise position in space-time. Every centimetre of architecture, every word spoken by every one of Qixotl's guests, pointed to this vault like a neon sign. It all came down to this. The casket was the centre of the universe, and nothing else mattered.

Sam saw Kathleen step forward. She was walking normally now, except maybe for the slightest of limps. Sam got the feeling the casket was waiting for her, calling her over. Whispering. Even breathing.

The Lieutenant stopped in front of the box. Sam was sure she saw the casket flare up when Kathleen got within touching distance of it. Silver light washed over her hands as she raised them over the lid of the casket. The Relic was sucking in air, taking a deep breath. Anticipating.

Kathleen put her palms on the surface of the lid. Ready to open up the box and release the Relic.

'Where's Qixotl?' hollered Mr Homunculette. 'Get me Qixotl!'

At the moment, nobody seemed to know where Qixotl was. Speaking for himself, Kortez wasn't particularly concerned. All things were one thing, he reminded himself, and all souls were one soul. The world of matter would move as it would move, regardless of the vain attempts of mortal flesh to disrupt its ebb and flow.

Although, to be honest, he was going to have to throttle Homunculette if the man didn't shut up soon.

Homunculette lay on the floor of the anteroom, his hands bound behind his back. One of the death-cultists stood guarding him, prodding him in the stomach whenever he tried to get up, but still failing to keep him quiet. The other cultist, the woman, looked on without feeling.

'Mr Homunculette attempted to assault me,' she explained, turning to face Kortez.

The Colonel nodded. 'Violence is a transient state of unilluminated physicality,' he recited.

'Quite,' said the woman.

Kortez had awoken from his meditation a few minutes earlier, to find himself alone in the guest room. Lieutenant Bregman had gone missing, presumably having been carried away by the aforementioned ebb and flow of material existence. The sound of caterwauling had led him here, to an anteroom close to the centre of the ziggurat.

'Animals! Heretics! Sadists!' yelled Homunculette. The cultist guarding him duly planted a foot in his groin.

Cousin Justine kept her eyes fixed on Kortez. 'I've been wondering about your place at this auction, Colonel. I mean no offence, but I think most of us were surprised to see humans in attendance here.' A faint smile appeared on her face. 'That is to say, representatives of the human race. Many of us still regard Earth as a low-interest world.'

'We've got a special interest in the property, Ms Justine,' Kortez told her. 'UNISYC has a long-standing appointment with the man in the box.'

'*Cousin* Justine,' the woman corrected him. 'But it's the nature of your bid that interests me, Colonel. I'm curious to know what Mr Qixotl is hoping to gain from Earth. Not technology, certainly. And not information, either. Earth has no temporal defences. If our host wanted to know anything about your culture, he'd find it out for himself.'

'There's more to our existence than material concerns, Cousin Justine.'

Justine looked blank, although Kortez knew she understood him really. 'Then your bid...?'

'There are some powers in the universe that cannot be resisted,' Kortez intoned. 'The forces of karmic virtue and inner balance will be satisfied.'

Cousin Justine and her Little Brother exchanged glances. They looked confused, but Kortez knew it was only a front. Like him, they appreciated the fact that there were higher levels of existence, mysteries only the spiritually illuminated could fathom. If he'd for one moment believed he was alone in his understanding of the universe, he'd probably have gone mad.

The male cultist jerked a thumb in the Colonel's direction, then put a finger to his temple and twirled it around. Kortez guessed it was some kind of secret sign. No doubt the man had recognised him as a spiritual equal.

Without warning, the air was filled with a high-pitched screaming sound, which seemed to ring out from every corner of the room at once. The toucans, Kortez realised. Out in the forest, the birds were screeching in agony, and the architecture here had obviously been designed to let the noise reverberate through the walls. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the alarm since he'd been in the ziggurat, but now the toucans were practically squawking their lungs out.

Something brushed across the Colonel's spinal column. He looked down at his shirt, and caught sight of the letters moving around across the face of the UNISYC insignia.

THE CORE DEFENCES HAVE BEEN TRIGGERED, the Shift reported.

Cousin Justine had apparently seen the same message, though not necessarily in the same place. 'Meaning?'

THE DEFENCES PROTECTING THE RELIC. TWO LEVELS DOWN.

The other cultist hissed. 'Someone's after the stiff.'

THEN THEY'RE NOT VERY INTELLIGENT. THE DEFENCES ARE PROGRAMMED TO TAKE INTRUDERS TO PIECES. WHOEVER'S IN THE VAULT, THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GET OUT ALIVE. WAIT. I'M GOING TO TRY SKIMMING THE CITY'S SYSTEMS. I'LL SEE IF I CAN IDENTIFY THEM.

There was a pause, during which everybody started squinting around the room, to see if there were any messages in the stonework they'd missed. Finally, the Shift returned.

COLONEL KORTEZ, it said. I'M AFRAID I'VE GOT SOME BAD NEWS.

'You mean, this ship's been attacked?'

The Doctor kept moving his hand across the interior wall of what he assumed was the black ship's control area. 'I don't mean anything,' he muttered.

'But that thing... the dead thing, yeah?... it was a part of this ship's crew?'

'I should think so.'

'And something's killed it?'

'Mmm. Tell me, how many Daleks did you invite to this auction?'

There was a moment's shuffling. Outside the ship, the toucans had started shrieking again, but you could hear Qixotl's nervous twitches even over that racket. 'Just the two. The invites specify no more than two reps from any one, er, agency.'

The Doctor finally found what he'd been fumbling for. A square projection, set into the wall at waist height. He started fingering the mechanism. Sadly, it wasn't designed for anything with fingers. 'So. If we assume this *was* a Dalek vessel, there should be another body somewhere on board.' He paused. 'Qixotl?'

'Uh, yeah?'

'There's something I've been meaning to ask you. And stop shuffling.'

'What?'

'My body. How did you get hold of it?'

There was no reply. 'If my body's so popular, a lot of people must have been waiting for me to pass away,' the Doctor continued. 'I'm assuming nobody thought they could take the risk of killing me themselves. My reputation must have been quite impressive, before the end.'

Qixotl mumbled what sounded like a "yes".

'I'd like to know how you managed to get your hands on it before anyone else,' the Doctor concluded. 'And I told you to stop shuffling.'

'I'm not shuffling,' Qixotl protested.

The Doctor fell silent. The shuffling went on.

'Oh,' said Qixotl.

'Ah,' said the Doctor.

He reached into his jacket pocket. Over the years, people had often commented on his ability to produce exactly the right item from his pockets at exactly the right time. Some had speculated that his pockets were extensions of the TARDIS, others had guessed he was just lucky. But then, they'd never read Yeltstrom's *Karma and Flares: The Importance of Fashion Sense to the Modern Zen Master*. They didn't appreciate the things a sentient life-form could achieve, if he was totally at one with the lining of his jacket.

The Doctor pulled a sink plunger out of his pocket, thrust it into the mechanism in the wall, and twisted it a little.

The secondary lighting system, the one the ship's original owners would have used whenever they had organic company/prisoners on board, was engaged. The Doctor turned. The control section was circular, twenty feet from side to side, lined with black display panels and even blacker navigational systems. At the far side of the area, in the position the Doctor knew had to be the pilot's "seat", was another lump of crystallised metal and biomass. Seen in direct light, the thing was hideous, like a particularly extreme piece of modern sculpture. The Doctor was reminded of a half-used, half-melted candle.

Straddling the dead thing was a decidedly alive thing. At first glance, it looked a lot like a spider, a heavy body supported by narrow, over-extended legs. Most of these legs were planted on the floor of the control section, although a couple were draped across the display panels. The limbs, the Doctor realised, were shafts of flexible crystal, each one no thicker than a piece of rope. The torso was a shapeless lump of the same substance, much more dense than the legs, topped by a geometric "head" made up of precise triangles and rectangles. The thing had no face, although several delicate sensory extensions were arranged around the cranial unit, glassy blue feelers that swayed from side to side as if tasting the air.

A single tendril extended from the underside of the being's torso, short but powerful-looking. The tendril had punctured the dead creature's shell, and the Doctor could see transparent vein-like tubes running along its length, some pumping digestive acid into the corpse, others transporting liquefied biomass up into the crystal creature's body. The biomass was green when it left the cadaver, but by the time it reached its destination, it had crystallised and turned bright blue.

Everything finally clicked into place.

The creature wasn't really spider-like, not in its natural environment. But it was adaptable. The only solid parts of the being were the "head", which contained the central nervous system, and the tendril. Whenever the creature moved from one kind of environment to another, it would shatter the rest of its body from the inside, then use the tendril to absorb fresh biomass – say, from any organic life-form unlucky enough to be in the vicinity – and use it to grow itself a new shell.

The being had attacked the ship, forced its way on board, and killed the original crew. The Doctor couldn't see it standing up to the crew's weapons with just its tendril, so he guessed the intruder had been armed. It had spent the trip here slowly absorbing its prey, saving up enough raw material for a new body when it arrived. The spider form was what it wore during space flight, ideal for low-gravity conditions, but looking more than a little shaky now it had reached Earth. Its legs trembled as it sucked the last of the organic matter out of the ship's pilot.

The Doctor took in the rest of the control area, and noticed two things of interest. One was the look of sheer nausea on Qixotl's face. The other was a small crystalline growth, attached to one of the navigational computers. The intruder had planted a sub-organic control device in the ship's systems, making the vessel obedient to its own will.

The Doctor had expected this, for the simple reason that he'd met these creatures before. But the last time he'd seen them, they'd been wearing much stockier bodies, better suited to life on a high-gravity world.

The crystalline thing looked up, or rather, it twisted its feelers towards the hatchway. Its head spun on top of its body.

'You-are-the-be-ing-called-Qix-ot-l?' it groaned. Its voice was a monotonous electronic gurgle, like a man with a throat full of nails.

The Doctor pointed to Qixotl. Qixotl whimpered.

'I-have-come-to-att-end-your-auc-tion,' the intruder announced.

'Erm... do you have an invite?' The intruder's head spun a little faster, so Qixotl raised his hands defensively. 'I mean, not that you're not welcome. But the security around here, y'know, if you're not on the guest list...'

'This-vess-el-was-int-er-cept-ed-in-mid-flight. I-have-taken-poss-ess-ion-of-the-in-vit-at-ion. I-have-al-rea-dy-trans-mitt-ed-my-bi-o-da-ta-to-your-Ci-ty's-sys-tems.'

'Oh. Well. That's all right then.' Qixotl shot the Doctor an anxious glance. 'Does this mean...?'

'It means any Daleks you may have invited are a no-show,' the Doctor told him, flashing a quick smile at the crystalline creature. 'The Krotons have come to take their place.'

MR QIXOTL'S STORY

Traducersville, Dronid, local year 15367

22:55; one can down, no ill effects so far.

The club was called Shockley's Den of Almost Limitless Iniquity, and it was starting to get on Mr Qixotl's nerves. OK, so the decor was nice. All the rooms were half-lit and shady-looking, and the balls in the pool rooms were artificial intelligence jobs, so they consoled you in teeny squeaky voices whenever you missed a shot. And yeah, there were plenty of side-cubicles where you could do deals in private, and yeah, the drinks were cheaper than battery acid. The problem, in Qixotl's view, was the clientele.

They were all Professionals. Professionals with a capital "P". Qixotl had been hanging around the underworlds of Mutter's Spiral since he'd been a tube-squirt, he'd dealt in everything from stolen time capsules to illicit cloned body parts, but never before had he seen a planet that took its criminal operations so seriously. If you worked for one of the organised crime networks on Dronid, you were considered to be a career-minded citizen. The Professionals were the kind of people who'd put "thug" or "hired killer" on their passports and be proud of it.

In theory, the set-up should have suited Mr Qixotl down to the ground, but in practice, it was getting to be a pain in the neck. Most of the Professionals crowding around the bar area were wearing suits, for a start. Not classy designer numbers, like Qixotl's; old black-tie-and-jacket numbers. Some of them probably dealt in hot DNA for a living, but they looked like a bunch of accountants. All much, much too formal for Qixotl's liking. He was a wild card, a one-off, a free spirit...

His discomfort had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that these people made him feel like an amateur. No no no. Nothing at all.

Behind the bar, a girl leaned over to take the order of the Professional standing next to Mr Qixotl. Another suit, Qixotl noted. 'Two glasses of Tequila Mockingbird,' the man said, raising his voice above the I-bet-I've-shot-more-people-than-you-this-week hubbub around him. 'And where can I get hold of some dystronic explosive?'

The girl checked a chalkboard on the wall behind her. 'Twelve denaris for the drinks,' she said. 'And... erm, no one's in tonight who does dystronic weapons. Will Klutterbug missiles do?'

The Professional frowned. 'I can live with 'em.'

'You want Mr VenFaxil. He's in pool room number three. Two denaris service charge, please. Thank you.'

The man's drinks, when the girl finished mixing them, turned out to be bright blue, with two thumb-sized genetically engineered flamingos wading around in each glass. Crass, thought Qixotl. He waited until the Professional had moved away from the bar, then raised his hand.

'Another can of Blue Dog,' he said. 'And I'm looking for some high-level propulsion systems here, yeah?'

23:07; two cans down, still sober.

Mr Qixotl sat in one of the side-cubicles, opposite a man who, according to the girl behind the bar, was generally known as "Mr Gabriel". From what Qixotl had gathered, the man was a Gabrielidean, one of the many off-worlders who'd come to Dronid looking for an easy pinch. Gabrielideans didn't have proper names back on their own planet, so Qixotl couldn't help feeling that the handle this one had chosen for himself wasn't too original. In Qixotl's opinion, meeting a Gabrielidean called "Mr Gabriel" was like meeting a Dalek called "Mr D Arlek" or someone from Earth called "Harold Human".

'Let me make sure I'm on your wavelength,' Mr Gabriel said. 'What you want, and I'm not going to mince words here, is a new dematerialisation circuit. Is that what you're saying?'

Qixotl looked over his shoulder, even though there was nothing behind him but the wall. It was a kind of gut reaction. 'I wouldn't, y'know, put it like that,' he said.

Mr Gabriel smiled warmly. The smile didn't look entirely natural, but that was understandable,

as the humanoid body he wore was obviously artificial. To give the Gabrielideans credit, at least they were trying to blend in on Dronid. 'Don't worry yourself, Mr Keyhoe. Nobody's bugging us, except maybe the staff, and they're pretty discreet. No need to get edgy just yet, OK?'

'Qixotl.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Qixotl. Not Keyhoe. Q-i-x-o-t-l. Kee-hot-l.'

'Qixotl. Right.' Mr Gabriel smiled again, and the smile was exactly the same as it had been before, so the software in his face clearly wasn't very versatile. The Gabrielidean appeared to be middle-aged, and he was kind of cuddly, despite the suit and the lump in the pocket where he kept his staser. He was a lot like someone's uncle, thought Qixotl, all bright eyes and shallow wrinkles. 'The Time Lords aren't going to be sniffing around here, if that's what's you're thinking,' Gabriel went on. 'I've been dealing in time-tech ever since I got to this planet, and the High Council hasn't caught on yet. Can I ask you something, Mr Qixotl?'

'Er, yeah. Sure.'

'Where'd you get a TARDIS from, anyway?'

Qixotl bit his lip. 'Who said I had a TARDIS?'

'C'mon. You need a demat circuit, that means you've got a TARDIS. Let me guess. You got friends on Gallifrey, am I right? And they managed to sneak you out an old type 60, but the demat circuit's messed up. Listen, I've heard it all before. You don't have to start squirming.'

Qixotl squirmed anyway. He didn't like to think of his ship as a TARDIS any more. He'd changed its whole structure, its whole operating system, just to make sure the High Council couldn't track it. The demat circuit had popped as soon as he'd got to Dronid, and he'd been stuck here ever since. For a while, he'd been happy to stick around, but things had changed in the last couple of days.

To be honest, Qixotl was lucky to have got himself stranded here, on a planet where it was at least possible to get hold of spare TARDIS parts. A couple of generations ago, one of the Time Lord Cardinals had tried building a powerbase on Dronid, putting together an army in the vain hope of overthrowing the High Council. He'd been dragged back to Gallifrey in the end, natch, but there were still bits and pieces of time-tech lying around the cities, left-overs from his time in residence. The organised crime networks had recovered most of them, which was why they more or less ran Dronid, these days. The planet was pretty primitive – they still used combustion engines around here, for pity's sake, and the people had only just invented TV – but Qixotl had heard you could pick up the blueprints for a demat gun in the underworld, if you knew where to look.

'You want to get some more drinks in?' asked Mr Gabriel.

23:23; three cans down, starting to feel "relaxed".

Qixotl had spent the last few minutes small-talking with Mr Gabriel, skirting around the big question, "How much is a demat circuit going to cost?". Qixotl knew full well he wouldn't be able to afford the hardware, not right away. He didn't have enough local currency to hire an atmosphere vessel, let alone buy a chunk of solid-state Time Lord technology. Once he got an estimate from Gabriel, he'd be spending the next week or three doing little jobs around the capital city, saving up the denaris. That is, if he didn't get knifed in the back first.

'Don XaPristi?' Mr Gabriel repeated, as if not believing his ears.

Qixotl shrugged. 'What can I say? I sold the Don some faulty merchandise. Couple of items that didn't go "bang" as loudly as they should've done, right? I mean, y'know, it's not like I didn't offer him a refund or anything.'

Mr Gabriel's face went into "grim" mode. 'Yeah, but the Don's one of the old school. Hereditary gangster. Someone crosses him, it's a question of honour. Like an insult to his family name.' Mr Gabriel drew his finger across his throat, just to press the point home.

Mr Qixotl didn't need telling. He'd only met XaPristi once, but the Don had come across as a Grade-A psychopath. XaPristi had been wearing a fur wrap during the meeting, genetically augmented, with a mouth full of teeth snapping away at either end. The sign of an unbalanced mind, that.

'Right,' said Qixotl. 'The point is, he says he'll overlook this little problem if I pay him back with interest, yeah?'

'How much interest are we talking about?'

'About 400 per cent.'

Mr Gabriel reached for the Blue Dog. 'So, you want to get yourself off Dronid while you've still got all your legs?'

Mr Qixotl felt like hissing. He hated people who did that. Technically, this planet was supposed to be called "Dronid"; that was the name the locals had always used, anyway. But there'd been a typo in the first edition of *Bartholomew's Planetary Gazeteer*, so the rest of the universe called it "Dronid", including the off-worlders who came to make a living/killing here. And, as the off-worlders were at the heart of the planet's economy, most of the natives went along with them. Some people always had to be picky, though.

'There's a lot of demand for time technology right now,' Mr Gabriel continued, between mouthfuls of Blue Dog. 'You know how it is. Everyone's trying to get away from Dronid before the Time Lords come back. A lot of Professionals are talking about building their own armed-up TARDIS units, maybe tapping into the Eye of Harmony behind the High Council's back.'

'I get the idea. What you're saying is, the circuit's going to cost me an arm and a... wait a minute. What d'you mean, "before the Time Lords come back"?''

'You haven't heard? There's a lot of unhappy rumbling, down in the underground. They say the High Council's making plans for some kind of war. Somebody's upset them, and badly.'

Mr Qixotl felt like sulking. Typical. He was always the last to know these things. 'So surprise me. Who are they supposed to be fighting?'

'Who knows? Like I said, it's only a rumour. D'you know there's a whole fleet of Gabrielidean warships on its way to Dronid? Heard it on the TV this afternoon.' Mr Gabriel chuckled an artificial chuckle. 'That's my government, bless 'em. The word is, the Time Lords have set it all up. The warships are acting for the High Council. Don't ask me what the Gabrielideans are getting out of the deal.'

'I'm missing something here,' Qixotl said. 'OK, so the Time Lords are going to war. Then why are they sending the warships to Dronid?'

'Wish I knew. It's going to be where they have their first face-off with the enemy, that's all I've heard. Maybe they're hoping all us Professionals are going to get wiped in the crossfire. I mean, it's embarrassing for them, knowing a planet like this has got people trying to build TARDISes on it.'

'I have to use the little bipeds' room,' said Mr Qixotl.

23:42; four cans down, going beyond "relaxed" and into the realms of "introspective".

Qixotl had picked up another couple of cans on the way back from the toilets, and he'd already downed one, even though he hadn't gone back to the cubicle yet. He stopped off in one of the club's relaxation lounges, where Professionals huddled together in suspicious little clusters, discussing the latest developments in narcotics science. The lounge was designed to make the Professionals feel at home, with a black-and-white Bakelite TV mounted on the wall in one corner, and the skinned corpses of undercover policemen dangling artistically from the ceiling on meat hooks. All very tasteful, really.

Qixotl made his way across to the TV. Someone else was already standing in front of the screen, drink in hand. The Professional was young, dressed in the obligatory black suit, with an unconvincing frown on his face. Another Gabrielidean, Qixotl judged.

The TV station – Dronid only had the one – was running a news bulletin. Qixotl watched a piece of footage that had presumably been taken by one of the surveillance satellites the off-worlders had put into orbit. Half a dozen spaceships were moving through the vacuum in close formation. The craft were plain black cuboids, utterly smooth and featureless, but you knew, you just knew, that at a moment's notice they could open up their gunports and reveal a whole host of nasty weapons systems.

'Gabrielidean warships,' Qixotl murmured.

The Professional turned to face him. The man would have looked worried, if his facial software had been subtle enough.

'The Time Lords,' he said. 'They're coming for us, aren't they?'

'Yeah, right,' said Qixotl. He tried his best to sound cynical about the whole thing.

23:49; five cans down, wobbly enough to knock over furniture without noticing it, but sober enough to deny being drunk in any way, shape, or form.

'And that's not all,' Mr Gabriel said, on the other side of the table.

Qixotl picked up a couple of the empty cans in front of him. All of a sudden, he had the irresistible urge to balance them on top of one other. 'Go on.'

'You want to know what else the rumours say? The rumours say the Doctor's involved.'

Qixotl had made a three-can tower in record time, but the word "Doctor" made his hand shake, so it all came tumbling down. 'Doctor? Like, *the* Doctor Doctor?' Qixotl threw his hands up in despair, and very nearly poked himself in the eye. 'OK, that's it, show's over. The Doctor's involved. Whoever the Time Lords are fighting, they don't stand a chance.'

'Yeah? When did I say the Doctor's working for the Time Lords? Sure, the story says he's coming here to fight for Gallifrey, but a couple of the pundits are saying he's gone over to the enemy. They're saying he's had it with the way the High Council's treated him over the years.'

Qixotl belched. 'Good luck to whoever he's going up against, that's all *I'm* saying.'

'Yeah. I've heard the stories. You know Mr Abel, works for the InCorporate? He says he winged the Doctor with a microwave knife one time, and the guy just walked away from it. I mean, a microwave knife. We're talking serious tissue damage here.'

'Tell me about it. Last time I saw the Doctor, there was a whole flotilla of Antiridean organ-eaters on his tail, and he got off without a scratch. Jammy sod.'

Mr Gabriel's face software went into surprise overdrive. 'You've met the Doctor?'

'Couple of times. We didn't get on, y'know?' One by one, Qixotl picked up and shook the cans on the table, but they all seemed to be empty, for some reason. 'And I'm telling you, he's a force of nature. You can't fight a force of nature, right?'

Mr Gabriel's face settled down a bit. 'Maybe it's different this time. If the Time Lords are at war, the enemy's got to be someone big. I mean, forget the Daleks, I'm talking *big*. If the Doctor's ever going to get stiffed, it's going to be now. Everyone wants a piece of the action. You know the Celestis? Word is, the Celestis have got agents on both sides of the fight. And in a couple of the organisations here on Dronid, you get the idea? And the Paradox people are hanging around waiting to see how much damage gets done. You know what they're like. Vultures.'

'The Faction's going down,' Qixotl said, with the voice of slightly inebriated authority. 'They've been outclassed ever since the InCorporate turned up on this planet. Hey! This can hasn't been opened yet. Isn't that great?'

24:12; six cans down, getting to that stage in the evening when it becomes impossible to be bored by any topic of conversation, however stupid or pointless it may be.

At the end of the meeting, Qixotl shook hands with Mr Gabriel, but missed. As expected, the price Gabriel set for the demat circuit was extortionate. When my ship's working again, Qixotl told himself, I'm going to track him down as an embryo and inject something really nasty into his albumen. That'll show him.

He stopped by the bar again on his way out, wondering if he should maybe take another couple of cans with him. Right now, he needed something to take his mind off his problems. Or to take his mind off this level of reality. Whichever came first.

When he started elbowing his way towards the bar, however, everything changed.

In front of him, making their way through the crowd of black-clad Professionals, were two figures Qixotl recognised. They had their backs turned, thankfully, but their slicked-back hair and cheap designer suits gave them away in an instant. So, for that matter, did the way they were hissing at the girl behind the bar.

Don XaPristi's men. Old style thugs, probably recruited from the ghetto gangs. Qixotl had seen a lot of them since he'd arrived on Dronid. Neanderthals, mostly, all sharpened teeth and gold medallions. They were slimy, they were ugly, and they tended to be quite extraordinarily violent.

Mr Qixotl turned, and ran. Which was stupid, bearing in mind how crowded the bar area was. He scattered the Professionals around him, and stumbled towards the exit, knocking aside the various chairs, glasses, and customers in his path.

Behind him, there was a shout, then the sound of scurrying feet. Qixotl swore. All in all, his exit from Shockley's Den of Almost Limitless Iniquity wasn't what you could have called subtle.

24:22; still six cans down, but a lot more sober than a few minutes previously.

Qixotl bolted along the backways of Traducersville, tactically knocking over any garbage cans he happened to come across. There probably wasn't much point in doing that, but it couldn't hurt. He'd looked over his shoulder once or twice, and he hadn't seen any sign of the thugs, so he guessed he'd shaken them off back in the slums. But then, it was too dark to see very far, and his vision wasn't exactly perfect, what with the curse of the Blue Dog upon him and all. So he kept moving, just to be on the safe side.

Don XaPristi would have sent the men to give him a warning. The kind of warning that made you go "ouch" in lots of unusual places. Qixotl was running out of time, and running out of options. One way or another, he had to get hold of the cash for a demat circuit.

And then what?

Hmm. Funny. He didn't normally bother with long-term plans. For the last half-hour, though, there'd been something nagging at him. Ever since Mr Gabriel had told him about the Doctor, and the great battle that was supposed to be coming to Dronid.

'Maybe it's different this time...'

Yeah. He needed his ship in working order, but there was a profit to be made here, right? He'd stumbled into the middle of something big, maybe big enough to shake up the whole timeline. And if somebody knew how to exploit the situation properly, say, somebody with a stolen TARDIS and not too many scruples...

Oh. Oh, yes. That was it. That was lovely.

Mr Qixotl had just had a very, very interesting idea.

8

THE BODY POLITIC

The vault had, in a very real sense, come to life. And it wasn't happy.

The walls were screaming. Earlier, Bregman had heard the toucans shrieking their heads off in the rainforest, and now the same kind of sound was filling up the vault, a squawking, screeching, cackling noise that seemed to come from every direction at once. The voice from inside the casket fell silent. Bregman turned, searching the vault for the source of the screaming, but all she saw was Sam, standing in the doorway behind her. Frozen. Like a rabbit caught in headlights. Bregman guessed she probably looked the same way herself.

Then the walls began to blossom. Shoots forced their way out of the cracks in the stone, their stems shot through with deep red arteries, and buds the colour of dead flesh broke open before Bregman's eyes. The blooms had petals like flowers, but they were scarred and wrinkled like old skin. Something moved under Bregman's feet, and she stumbled backwards, until her spine was pressed against the side of the casket. In front of her, the floor rippled, as organic tendrils pushed the slabs aside and reached up towards the torchlight.

Bregman started stomping on the growths, trying to mash them back into the ground. It wasn't really a rational response to the situation, but what the hell? Now the voice had abandoned her, she didn't have anything to do except panic. She looked up as she stamped, hoping to make eye contact with Sam again, but Sam wasn't there. The vault had changed shape around her. New walls had grown out of the stonework, curtains of pink fleshy material that stretched between the floor and the ceiling, held in place by columns of living muscle.

She'd obeyed the voice without question. She'd been weak. In shock, maybe, after what had happened in the shrine. The voice had latched onto that weakness, had used it to pull her here through the corridors of the ziggurat. Now she was waking up, at last, only to find that she had no way of getting out again.

Come to think of it, why had she gone to the Faction's shrine in the first place? Had the voice led her there, too? Had she ever been in control of her own body?

At her feet, a cluster of saplings reared up out of the floor, their buds swelling in front of Bregman's face until each one was the size of her head. The buds were the colour of scar tissue. They weren't plants, Bregman realised. Back at the gate of the Unthinkable City, Korteze had told her there was a bio-induction system in place on this island, pumping new genetic material into the ecosystem. The same kind of device was at work here in the vault. Something was seeding the area with living matter, squeezing blood out of the stone. No human-made machine could have done the job this fast, though. It took months, years, for a bio-induction system to have a visible effect on an environment. Not seconds.

The first of the head-sized buds opened up in front of Bregman. There was a potato-shaped lump of biomass at the centre of the flower, covered in bumps and indentations, a sticky layer of skin stretched across the surface.

A face. A half-formed human face, too flawed to be anything but ugly. Even if the features had been given time to develop, the nose wouldn't have been streamlined enough, the eyes wouldn't have been quite the right shape. And the hair, stuck to the head in slippery wet clumps, was a complete mess. The other buds began to unfold, and one after another, the head-flowers opened their eyes.

All the faces were identical, crude copies of Bregman's own. She wondered if this might be a good time to start screaming like a bastard.

The sky was as grey as ever, but after the interior of the spaceship it looked positively sunny. The Doctor noticed, with more than a little satisfaction, the look of shock on Qixotl's face as the man shuffled out of the ship after him.

'Told you so,' said the Doctor, out of the side of his mouth.

Qixotl blinked at him. 'Told you so what?'

'Told you it wouldn't go according to plan.' The Doctor nodded towards the Kroton, which was even now striding down the ship's gangway, its spindly legs shaking under the weight of its body. Its feelers were wobbling excitedly, and the Doctor got the impression it was trying to decide whether to start shooting at the plants floating around the roof garden.

The Doctor saw Qixotl's teeth clench. 'You've met these things before, right?'

'Twice. This is the first time I've seen one in its low-gravity form, though.'

'And, uh... do they like cheesy nibbles, at all?'

The topmost protrusion of the Kroton's body, the geometric crystal that could, loosely, be called its head, swung around to face them. At least, that's what the Doctor assumed it was doing, although the creature didn't actually have a face, as such. 'The-av-i-an-life-forms-are-disturbed.'

Qixotl looked at the Doctor. The Doctor shrugged. 'Er, that's right,' Qixotl mumbled. 'The toucans, yeah? It's your ship. They're reacting to it a bit badly. You know how avian life-forms are. Listen, there's a guest room all laid out for you downstairs, if you want to freshen up. Or whatever it is you do. I mean, if you don't mind the furniture.'

'The-auc-tion-will-pro-ceed-as-soon-as-poss-i-ble,' the Kroton insisted. 'There-will-be-no-de-lays.'

'No, no, of course not. I'm sure you've got a lot of important things to do back in, er, Kroton-space.'

'My-des-ig-na-tion-is-E-Ko-balt-Prime-of-the-Kro-ton-Ab-sol-ute. Comm-and-un-it-of-the-Kro-ton-Fifth-Latt-ice.'

'Well -' Qixotl began. But the Kroton hadn't finished warbling yet.

'This-vess-el-was-int-er-cept-ed. The-in-vi-ta-tion-was-dis-cov-ered-in-the-poss-ess-ion-of-its-crew. Your-auc-tion-is-of-int-er-est-to-the-Kro-ton-Ab-sol-ute. My-sup-er-i-or-un-its-in-the-Kro-ton-First-Latt-ice-have-al-read-y-been-no-ti-fied. A-War-spear-has-been-dis-patched-to-this-plan-et. The-War-spear-will-es-cort-the-Rel-ic-back-to-the-First-Latt-ice-once-it-has-been-sec-ured-for-the-Ab-so-lute.'

That sounded like a threat to the Doctor. Qixotl certainly looked a little taken aback. 'That is, y'know, if you make the highest bid,' the man pointed out.

'Yes,' bubbled E-Kobalt-Prime.

'Can I ask a question?' said the Doctor. 'Where's your dynatrope? I know your people never leave home without one.'

E-Kobalt paused before answering. 'I-will-not-re-quire-my-own-vess-el-to-com-plete-this-mission.'

'Really? How's your power supply?'

'The-Rel-ic-will-be-sec-ured-be-fore-re-en-er-gi-sa-tion-be-comes-ne-cess-ar-y.' There was a bit more head-spinning. The Kroton's legs quivered underneath its torso. 'The-grav-it-y-on-this-plan-et-is-un-suit-a-ble-for-this-bo-dy. I-will-need-to-re-con-struct-my-ex-ter-i-or-form-im-me-di-ate-ly.'

Qixotl cleared his throat. 'Well, yeah, it's like I said. If you want me to show you to your quarters...'

Before he could finish the sentence, the Kroton shattered. Literally, shattered. The legs disintegrated, allowing the torso to drop to the ground. The body exploded into several thousand shards of translucent crystal on impact, and squashed a few more of the floating plants in the process. There was an almighty cracking sound. Qixotl actually shrieked, but the Doctor merely winced.

All that was left of E-Kobalt was his head (*its* head, the Doctor corrected himself; Krotons were strictly speaking asexual, although they acted in such a loutish fashion it was hard to think of them as anything but male), plus a shapeless lump of white crystal that had once formed the inner core of the torso. It reminded the Doctor of raw clay in a sculptor's studio, ready to be moulded into something more artistic.

'Oh no,' squealed Qixotl. 'Don't tell me I've lost another one.'

The Doctor peered at the crystal. 'Don't worry. It's just growing itself a new body. Look.' Even as he spoke, delicate cracks were appearing across the surface of the substance. New limbs were

forming under the skin, squirming impatiently as they grew. 'Fascinating. I've never seen this process before. I always assumed it'd be a private moment for them.'

'Can it hear us?'

'Oh, I shouldn't think so. See, the feelers have dropped off. It hasn't developed new sensory systems yet.'

Qixotl looked distinctly uncomfortable all the same. 'OK, Doctor, let's get serious here. You heard what the life-form said. There's a whole Warspear full of these things coming. Whatever a Warspear is.'

'Yes. And they're not going to be too happy if E-Kobalt doesn't get what he wants at the auction.' The Doctor said it in his best I-told-you-so voice, but Qixotl just shrugged.

'Can't say it bothers me much. Once the property's sold, I'm gone. The Krotons can blow up the whole sodding planet if they feel like it. What I'm saying is, things are hotting up around here. You can't hang about any longer. I mean, what happens if the bidders figure out who you are? We're going to have a riot on our hands, y'know?'

'You should have thought of that before!'

'I was kind of expecting you to stay dead,' Qixotl protested. 'OK, OK. Here's the deal. You go away now, and don't get in the way of the auction, yeah? In return, I'll let you have 40 per cent. Can't say fairer than that, right?'

The Doctor was puzzled. '40 per cent of what?'

'The proceeds. 40 per cent of whatever I get for the stiff.'

The Doctor felt his jaw drop. That hadn't happened in centuries.

'I'll give you your cut the next time I see you around,' Qixotl told him. 'Really. Cross my heart. Universe this small, we've got to bump into each other sooner or later.'

'You're offering me 40 per cent of my own body?' boggled the Doctor.

'Uh-huh. I mean, don't get me wrong. I'd give you 50 per cent, but I've got expenses to cover here.'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

Qixotl sighed extravagantly. 'If you want to play it like that, fine. But look, if you want your body back, there's no way I can just hand it over to you. Not with this lot around. There's only one way you're going to get your hands on it without causing trouble.'

'Which is?'

'You're going to have to bid at the auction. Like everyone else.'

'Over my dead -' the Doctor began.

He was interrupted by a snapping, crackling noise from the body of E-Kobalt. The new limbs had finished growing. The crystal had split open at various strategic points across the torso, making way for four thick, tube-like extensions. Not crystalline, the Doctor noted; the limbs looked more like some form of flexible metal. One ended in a pincer, one ended in an open tube not unlike a flame-thrower, and the other two ended in flat plates that might have been feet. Presumably, thought the Doctor, the Kroton had some kind of malleable metallic core. Impressive, but hardly efficient. No wonder the things had to suck out peoples' neural energies to stay alive.

A low groaning sound issued from E-Kobalt's head, the one part of its body that hadn't changed shape during the metamorphosis. Flakes of crystal fell away from the Kroton's skin, the torso sculpting itself into something smooth and sharp-edged before the Doctor's eyes.

'Wakey wakey,' he muttered, as new sensory systems began to form across E-Kobalt's body.

Sam threw herself at the wall again. The pink stuff stretched under her weight, but it didn't break. The wall was like a membrane, tough enough to hold her back, but thin enough to let her see shapes moving around on the other side. There, at the centre of the vault, Sam could make out the silver glow of the casket, and the tangle of shadows surrounding it. Kathleen was there, somewhere, lost among the silhouettes of the things that had reached up out of the floor.

The wall hadn't been there a minute ago. It had grown from the brickwork, like something organic. Sam could see purple veins running through the membrane, pulsing in time to the shrieking of the walls. The exit tunnel was behind her, but something red and sticky had stretched itself across the corridor in front of the stairway, a web of razor-fine fibres that looked to Sam like one of those retinal patterns you saw in biology textbooks.

The floor trembled under her feet. She stood aside, and watched as two thick-stemmed flowers grew from the cracks between the stone slabs. The blooms turned to look at Sam, tiny black eyes squinting out of their half-formed faces. Sam tried to ignore the fact that they looked just like Kathleen.

The slabs shifted again, as new shoots forced themselves up into the light. Sam kept side-stepping them, until she ran out of floor and found herself pressed up against one of the vault's solid brick walls.

There was no choice, then. She'd have to make a break for it down the corridor, and deal with the retina-web when she came to it. She'd worry about Kathleen later.

Another shoot exploded from the wall by her ear, spraying her with chips of stone. Sam ducked. The shoot swung to and fro above her head, moving from side to side like an elephant's trunk. Sam didn't move, didn't even breathe. If it was searching for something, it was probably searching for her. She didn't want to give it any clues. Finally, the bud at the end of the shoot burst open.

And there was a baby inside it.

A humanoid baby, the size and shape of an average one-year-old, sculpted out of sticky red biomass. Its skin was a map of clotted veins, and its big black eyes stared out of a fat, fleshy face. Sam almost gagged. The baby floated above her like a helium balloon, a thick umbilical cord connecting its belly to the bud that had spawned it. It rubbed its eyes, with tiny-fingered hands. Then it looked down at Sam.

It was, without question, the most repulsive thing Sam had ever seen. Not least because it was so familiar. Yeah, its skin was the colour of dried blood and it looked like it had been made out of mincemeat. Yeah, all babies were pretty similar anyway. But Sam's mother had shown her the old photos often enough.

God, she thought. I never knew I was such an ugly kid.

The whole vault shuddered. The brick wall cracked open from floor to ceiling. Sam threw herself towards the corridor, through a small garden of Bregman-faced flowers. Pink tendrils reached out for her through the hole in the wall, their buds popping open and releasing more of the meat-babies into the air. Sam glanced over her shoulder as she reached the mouth of the tunnel. The babies were at various stages of development, some toddlers, some little more than embryos, but all of them were tiny little Sams.

More games with biodata. It wasn't hard to figure out what was happening here. The vault was using Sam's own biodata to create defences, as a way of protecting the mysterious Relic. She didn't know why the defences were so complicated, though. If Qixotl had wanted to get rid of intruders, he could have just put some kind of laser-screen around the casket and fried anyone who got too close.

But then again, there were a lot of alien species in the ziggurat, and some of them were probably laser-proof. So, if the defences turned your own biodata against you, they were bound to find something you were susceptible to. Yeah, that made sense. The vault knew every weakness Sam had. Even the babies... human beings were funny about babies, Sam knew that. Babies were supposed to be pure, innocent, lovable. Most humans would have had trouble fighting babies, they'd feel like they were committing a cardinal sin, however pig-ugly the sprogs were.

Something grabbed Sam's foot. She didn't know what. She fell, face-first, into the offal-flavoured undergrowth. Before she could even think about getting up again, she felt something hovering above her head, breathing cold air down her neck. She tried to turn onto her back, but whatever had snared her was holding onto her legs, winding itself around her thighs. She managed to squeeze out of its grip, eventually, but by then she was already cornered.

The thing hovering over her was baby-shaped, and its siblings were bobbing up and down around it, arranging themselves into some kind of attack formation. The babies floated down towards her face, their chubby little arms outstretched. Sam wondered if they'd developed teeth yet.

Homunculette had stopped struggling. Whatever the cultists had used to tie him up, it wasn't going to budge. At the training complex on Gallifrey XII, the War Cardinals had taught him the basics of escapology; generations of Time Lord renegades, he'd been told, had discovered that

there was no skill in all the universe more important than the ability to get out of tight corners. Homunculette had been cynical at the time. Escapology, he'd thought, hadn't helped most of the Time Lords get off the original homeworld before it had been wiped.

He was even more cynical now. He lay on his side, on the floor of the anteroom, the two Faction Paradox lunatics standing guard over him. The man seemed intent on finding a reason to kick Homunculette in the stomach every few minutes, while the woman still looked as serene as ever.

The witch. Homunculette felt it burning up his nervous system again, the fury of the righteous, the memory of Marie's broken face. There was only room for one idea in his head right now, and the idea was *revenge*. Everything else was background noise.

The male cultist kicked him once more, and Homunculette screamed at him in Old High Gallifreyan, but the shout seemed like nothing next to the howling of the birds outside the ziggurat.

'What are you going to do with him?' somebody asked. It was the human Colonel, Homunculette realised. The man was standing somewhere behind him.

Cousin Justine considered the question for a moment. 'We believe we should respect the beliefs of our host. We will leave judgement of Mr Homunculette to Mr Qixotl.'

'He's on his way,' said a new voice.

Homunculette wriggled around until his face pointed towards the doorway. Two individuals had entered the anteroom. One, the one who'd spoken, was the idiot with the curls and the laughable fashion sense. The other wasn't even humanoid, although it looked like it wanted to be. It was as tall as the average Gallifreyan, its flesh sculpted out of smooth white crystal. Its bulky torso filled most of the doorway, and two thick arms extended from the front of its body. One of them seemed to end in a weapon of some kind.

'A Kroton?' the witch-woman said.

'Shee-it,' smirked her companion.

The curly man bowed. 'May I present to you all, E-Kobalt-Prime of the Kroton Absolute. Fifth Lattice, apparently.' He stretched out a hand, as if to usher the Kroton into the room. 'I think you all should know, E-Kobalt's already called in the reinforcements. So please try to be polite.'

The crystal monstrosity shambled into the room, its head spinning stupidly on top of its body. Homunculette noticed that someone had scratched letters into the thin layer of dust on the floor in front of him. I'VE GOT TO ADMIT, I'M SURPRISED, said the Shift.

Kortez cleared his throat. 'On behalf of the people of Earth -' he began.

'We-are-read-y-to-be-gin-the-auc-tion?' queried E-Kobalt, not waiting for the human to finish the speech. The Colonel looked slightly insulted.

Cousin Justine stepped forward. 'E-Kobalt-Prime. Faction Paradox welcomes you here, in the name of the Grandfather, and by the will of the Spirits.' The Kroton's head spun all the way around, as if searching for these Spirits it was being introduced to. 'Please excuse us, but we weren't expecting a being such as yourself. Your people aren't known to be time-active, and your empire is many millennia away from here. We understood you possessed only theoretical knowledge of the Spirits of Time.'

'The-time-corr-i-dor-to-this-loc-a-tion-was-op-ened-by-the-al-i-en-ness-el-I-int-er-cep-ted. The-War-spear-I-have-summ-oned-will-fol-low-the-same-corr-i-dor.'

'But even so. To find you interested in the Relic...'

'What she means is, nobody takes you seriously,' slurred Homunculette. 'We were expecting someone dangerous. The Cybermen or the Sontarans. Even the Voord are more frightening than you people.' The other Faction cultist sniggered at that, but it didn't stop him kicking Homunculette in the guts.

The man with the curls smiled. Homunculette got the feeling he was laughing at all of them. 'I can see we're all going to get along splendidly. Mr Qixotl's gone to shut off the alarms, by the way. Until he gets back, does anybody feel like a quick game of chess? I've got a pocket set with me, and I think I've got the hang of the way the horsey things move now.'

Bregman wasn't sure where the labyrinth had come from. The last thing she remembered, properly remembered, was the vault. The Relic had been behind her, and her own face had been staring at her from the buds of the flesh-plants. She vaguely recalled seeing the entrance to a tunnel somewhere nearby. She seemed to remember trampling through the flowers, crushing her

own head under her boots as she'd made for the exit.

The walls of the labyrinth were smooth and fleshy, made of a substance that seemed almost transparent, if you stared at it hard enough. There were dark shapes moving on the other side of those walls. The architecture of the vault had crumbled, letting the maze grow up in its place. The floor was carpeted with rubble and biomass.

Another bunch of flowers exploded from the ground in front of Bregman. They were larger than the others she'd seen, the buds almost touching the ceiling, each stem the width of one of her thighs. She skidded to a halt, slipped, and fell onto her back. Half a dozen crude copies of her own head swung down at her, blinking in a dazed fashion.

Jesus. Did she really look like that? The faces were so bland, so lost-looking, so... *stupid*. Dumb animal faces. Cows on the way to the slaughter-yard, hedgehogs ambling across motorways. Yeah, and wasn't that the truth? Lieutenant Kathleen Bregman, a proud example of the human race, the sentient cattle of the universe. Around here, even the furniture was smarter than she was.

The heads swung this way and that, taking in the labyrinth around them but not understanding the first thing about it. And they were so damned ugly. Deformed, even. Christ. How could she, how could any human being, ever face the world again after what she'd seen here in the City? How was she even supposed to pretend to be part of an intelligent species? Stupid. Like Homunculette had said. Too stupid to get off this planet. There was a stitch in Bregman's side, a sick feeling in her gut. She stank of sweat, the stench of a primitive ape-creature with no control over its own biology. Ugly. Primitive. Useless.

The heads kept leering down at Bregman, reflecting every single one of her imperfections back at her. The floor trembled beneath her backbone, but she didn't bother getting up. There didn't seem much point trying to stay alive any longer. Not now she knew what she was really worth.

The dinosaur was still busy sawing the heads off the vestal virgins. That was a relief, anyway. Right now, it wouldn't have surprised Qixotl if the figures had jumped out of the tapestry and gone walkabout in the ziggurat. The security centre hadn't been touched since he'd been here with the Doctor, but somehow the place felt alien to him now, like an old friend who suddenly wasn't speaking to him any more.

Naturally, he'd lied to E-Kobalt. The toucans weren't screeching because of the spaceship. The racket they were making was louder than a simple intruder alert. Something had activated the deeper defences of the ziggurat. Someone had reached the vault.

Mr Qixotl told the console to give him a visual scan of what was happening down on the lowest level. Immediately, the pixscreen was filled with an image Qixotl could only have described as disgusting. He squinted at it for a good half a minute before he realised what he was looking at. It was the interior of a human intestinal tract, blown up to absurd proportions.

He asked the console for an overview of the vault. Oh, right, now it made sense. Two of the humans had reached the Relic. How they'd got that far, Qixotl wasn't sure. Maybe it had been something to do with the corpse. The Doctor had a thing about humans, according to the old stories; something to do with his retroactive ancestry, apparently. The telepathic bits of his brain could have latched onto the humans, even after death. The stiff might have summoned them, sent out a psychic SOS, probably not even realising it was dead and therefore didn't actually need rescuing. But if the body could shut off most of the defences around it, just using its residual psychic ability... well, it was no wonder the Time Lords thought they could turn it into a weapon.

Even the corpse hadn't been able to shut down the core defences, though. Qixotl called up another visual. There she was, the UNISYC woman, being menaced by her own head, times six. Oddly, the heads were staring her out instead of attacking her.

Qixotl asked the console for a diagnostic. According to the figures on the pixscreen, the systems had analysed her biodata, and found her greatest weakness to be psychological, not physical. Specifically, she had an inferiority complex the size of the Crab Nebula. She was young, she was fit, she was healthy, but she *thought* she was a complete wreck on the verge of total bodily collapse. She had a bunch of appearance-related neuroses, too, which was only to be expected in a culture as media-aware as Earth's. The planet's TV transmissions were full of icon-images, Qixotl had noticed, cybernetically enhanced movie legends and smoother-than-life pop stars, all

plastic surgery and computer airbrushing. That kind of thing always got ape-descendants a bit paranoid.

In light of all this, the systems had decided not to kill the UNISYC woman. Instead, they were bombarding her with stimuli designed to trigger an industrial-strength nervous breakdown. In short, the vault was driving her mad. Being trapped in a labyrinth based on the design of her own large intestine was all part of the process.

Mr Qixotl goaded the master console into giving him the low-down on the other human. It turned out to be the Doctor's little assistant. No surprises there, then.

The girl wasn't anywhere near as unstable as the UNISYC agent, so the vault was attacking her physically, growing malicious little antibodies from its biomass, hostile infant versions of the girl herself. As Qixotl watched, another biological unit was vomited out of the walls. He frowned when he saw the form the new antibody took. All the defences were supposed to be based on the victim's own biodata, but this one looked different, somehow. Did the girl have things in her biodata Qixotl hadn't detected before, or had there been another systems glitch?

Well, anyway. Soon, both the humans would be dead. Qixotl considered shutting down the defences and letting them out of the vault, but then, if he did that, he'd have to boot up the security systems from scratch, and that'd take all day. No. He'd let them snuff it down there, and if anyone asked, he'd say it was their own fault. Diplomacy be damned. Neither of the humans was important, anyhow. The UNISYC woman was only an attachment to Kortez, and if the girl was the Doctor's pet, he could easily get hold of another one. There *were* nearly ten billion of them on this planet.

All in all, he had more important things to think about. The last of the bidders had arrived. The representatives would be getting impatient, and frankly, Mr Qixotl had run out of delaying tactics. At long last, it was time for the bidding to start.

'If I untie you, do you promise not to cause any more trouble?' hissed the Doctor.

Homunculette scowled up at him. 'Why?'

'Well, you know. In the interests of peace and galactic understanding, I have to insist you don't try to kill Cousin Justine again.' The Doctor looked around, more than a little furtively. The two Faction Paradox members had left Homunculette's side, and were conversing in the doorway of the anteroom. He couldn't hear what they were saying, mainly because E-Kobalt was reciting a speech about the supremacy of the Kroton race to Colonel Kortez. Kortez was, predictably, nodding. The Doctor had heard about Homunculette's assault on Justine from the Shift, and he'd already pocketed the offending sonic monkey-wrench, for close inspection later on.

'Animals,' Homunculette spat.

'I'm sorry?'

'Faction Paradox. Do you know what kind of damage those people do? Do you have any idea of the *things* they're supposed to worship? Do you?'

The Doctor nodded. 'I know. I agree, it's vitally important we make sure they don't get hold of my... of the Relic. I don't think smashing Justine's skull is the best way of going about it, though.' He tried to lip-read the conversation between Justine and Manjuele, but Justine had her back turned most of the time, and Manjuele was practically talking through his teeth. The Doctor caught what looked like the word "girl" on the man's lips.

Homunculette snorted. 'All right. I promise.'

'What? Oh, good.' The Doctor started untying the Time Lord. The Faction's agents had used symbioadaptive cord to do the binding, he noticed. The big show-offs. Still, rope was rope, however smart it was supposed to be.

He looked up at the cultists again. He thought he saw Manjuele point towards the floor, and mouth the words "in the vault".

'Faster,' hissed Homunculette.

'Yes, yes. I'm trying.' The Doctor leaned a little closer to the man's ear. 'Actually, I wanted to talk to you about your people. The Time Lords. Do you really think the High Council has a right to the Relic?'

'Right of survival,' Homunculette grunted.

'But things can't be that desperate, surely? Even by becoming involved in events here, you've

threatened the stability of the local timeline.' He kept one eye on the cultists, and saw Manjuele mutter what looked like "we've got her biodata".

'And I suppose you think you've got more of a right to the body than we have?'

'Well, actually...'

The cord came loose. Almost immediately, Homunculette was on his feet. He was quick, thought the Doctor, but he wasn't exactly graceful. 'I don't know who you are, but I know what you're trying to do. You're giving me the old "non-interventionist" routine. Well, it's not going to work. We need the weapon, and we're going to have the weapon. Understand?'

The Doctor stood. 'I was only thinking about Gallifrey's responsibilities.'

'Damn our responsibilities. This is war.' Homunculette turned, to face the two Paradox cultists. 'And I've got better things to do around here than talk to you.'

He started to move away, in the direction of Cousin Justine. The Doctor grabbed his arm. Homunculette spun on his heel, his fists clenched.

Luckily, it was at this point that Qixotl ambled into the anteroom. He cast his eyes around the room, a big cheesy smile on his face.

'If I could have everyone's attention?' he said. 'Lovely. Well, as you've probably noticed, I've shut off the alarms, and everything's 100 per cent OK again.'

'The-auc-tion?' droned E-Kobalt.

'Oh yeah, the auction. Well, seeing as most of us are already here, we might as well make a start, right?'

The Doctor frowned to himself. He had hoped to delay the auction a little longer. 'I'm not sure we should rush into this -' he began.

'Shut up,' snapped Homunculette.

'Yeah,' agreed Little Brother Manjuele, only now noticing Homunculette was free, and looking less than happy about it.

I THINK WE'VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH, said the patterns in the torchlight reflecting off E-Kobalt's head.

'We're all agreed, then,' beamed Qixotl, deliberately avoiding the Doctor's gaze. 'Great. Mr Shift, d'you think you could go and fetch Mr Trask, at all? Save us time. Thank you.' He strolled across the floor, heading for the doorway on the other side of the room. The space beyond it was unlit, the Doctor noticed. So far, nobody had gone anywhere near it. 'If you'd all like to follow me, we can get this show on the road.'

There were mutters of relief from the assorted bidders. One by one, they followed Qixotl through the doorway. Homunculette was one of the last to go; he seemed determined not to let the Faction cultists get behind him at any point. The Doctor watched the Time Lord vanish into the darkness.

Damn our responsibilities. That was what he'd said. Homunculette had no sense of perspective, no concern for the universe-in-general, no regard for the consequences of his actions. The High Council had always been hypocritical in its dealings with other races, the Doctor knew that, but this was sheer bloody-mindedness.

Homunculette. A puppet. A thing created to act as an agent of a higher power. Was that all the Time Lord was? A little bundle of nerves and simple responses, doing the bidding of a Council that really couldn't have cared less about the Laws of Time?

It wouldn't have seemed so bad, if it hadn't been for that one niggling little doubt at the back of the Doctor's mind. Gallifrey had pushed him around, too. A show-trial here, a subtle manipulation there. Exarius. Peladon. Solos. Skaro. Time and time again, the High Council had dumped him in the middle of history's battlezones, knowing how he'd react, knowing he'd do their dirty work for them.

That was the worst thing. That one niggling little doubt, that one nagging question.

Was Homunculette just doing the same things *he'd* done for the High Council... while he'd been alive?

ENFANT TERRIBLE

The antibody was larger than all its siblings, and the others had already started orbiting around it, accepting it as their natural-born leader. The first few antibodies had been small and simple, little more than fleshy lumps of matter with killing instincts wired into their heads, but the vault had become more ambitious after a while. The antibody – it liked to think of itself as *the* antibody, now – was very nearly sentient, or at least, as sentient as a life-form could be without there being any risk of it developing a code of ethics.

It floated up towards the ceiling of the vault, then hovered above the victim's head for a few moments, its umbilical tube still tying it to its mother-bud. The victim lay among the growths on the floor, eyes and mouth wide open. The antibody smiled. Naturally, it had nothing but contempt for the girl. It had been grown from her biodata, so logically, she was responsible for its imperfections. It hadn't asked to be born, and it felt the human to be wholly at fault.

The antibody extended its arms, so it could see its own hands for the first time. Its fingers were stubby and half-formed, its wrists fat and inflexible. Hateful. The antibody decided that once the victim was dead, its first act would be to terminate itself.

As it drifted down towards the girl, it grew memories, and an identity started to develop in the folds of its formative brain. The antibody had been modelled on the girl's biodata, not on her psychological profile, so strictly speaking it shouldn't have shared her past. But there were certain things in the universe, rare and dangerous things, that could freeze experiences into a being's biodata; the security systems of the City knew that, so the antibody knew it, too. There were some things so powerful, all you had to do was brush against them and the memory would be coded into every cell of your body for the rest of your life.

The antibody wrapped its hands around the girl's neck, heard the skin on its fingers squealing like Cellophane. The girl tried to beat it off, but the antibody's siblings were moving into position around her arms, holding her still. She thrashed her head from side to side. From her memories, the antibody reached the conclusion it was a young human female. At least, the victim was a young human female, so the antibody reasoned that it should be, as well. A *her*, then, not an *it* any longer.

Her name was Samantha Angeline Jones. Her date of birth was the fifteenth of April, 1980. She didn't believe in astrology, but then, Arians were sceptical like that. Her parents were educated, socially aware, middle-class Londoners; her mother was a social worker, her father was a doctor. The antibody didn't remember their faces, exactly, but she knew what they meant to her. She'd grown up in the aftershock of what people liked to call Thatcher's Britain, had gone to a scummy comprehensive in East London, had been arrested for shoplifting at the age of twelve, all the usual stuff.

Her hair was dark. Her figure was athletic. There was a scar on the back of her left hand, where she'd been burnt with a cigarette end in a Dagenham nightclub at the age of fourteen (she'd lied about her age to get in, same as she did every weekend). There were still a couple of scars up her left arm, where she'd injected diamorphine and something had gone wrong under the skin. The scars had got her arrested, once, walking down East Ham High Street in a short-sleeved t-shirt.

The antibody cut off the victim's air supply. The girl didn't look scared, even though she was a minute or so away from death, and even though the other antibodies had started giggling in her ear. She looked confused, more than anything. Sam Jones, the antibody Sam Jones, wondered why that might be.

Antibody Sam dissected her personality a little further. She was a vegetarian, she discovered, the only person in her class who didn't think homosexuals ought to be shot on sight. She was on Amnesty International's mailing list, and she was planning to vote Labour as soon as she was old enough to vote. Of course, no one believed any of that when they saw her. If you looked the way

she looked, you were a non-personality. You were supposed to be either a thug who sold crack to schoolchildren or a mindless victim whose life was just one long string of fixes and vomiting fits.

The antibody stopped squeezing. The girl, the other Samantha Angeline Jones, managed to suck some air back into her lungs.

The victim had blonde hair. Real blonde, not out of a bottle. But Sam had dark hair, it was written into the genetics of her biodata.

Wait. She had to think.

Her name was Samantha Angeline Jones. Her birthday was the fifteenth of April, 1980. She didn't believe in astrology, but then, Arians were sceptical like that. Her parents were educated, socially aware, middle-class Londoners; her mother was a social worker, her father was a doctor. But her hair was blonde, not dark, and there was no cigarette burn on her hand. No scars on her arm, either.

'I don't smoke – I don't even drink Coke,' she remembered saying, when she'd first met the man with the curly hair and the police box. 'I'm a vegetarian.'

Antibody Sam let go. Her siblings burbled among themselves, not knowing which way to turn. On the floor, Sam the victim started pulling herself free of the flowers. The antibody searched her embryonic memory, trying to get a fix on what was happening.

Sam Jones had two sets of biodata. Two lifelines, running in parallel. One had dark roots, a bruise under her ribs that had never gone away, a bundle of old B&H gratis points stuffed into the top drawer of her dresser. The other Sam was different. Smoother around the edges. Cleaner. Not perfect, but more reliable, more predictable. It was the smooth version, the censored version, who was lying there on the floor of the vault.

That was why so many memories had been locked into the girl's biodata, the antibody realised. The vector of her entire life, from the first breath to the last rites, had been encoded in her biodata, a guideline for her existence on Earth. The dangerous parts, the dark, sticky, self-destructive parts, had been ripped out. Something or someone had twisted her timeline until she'd collided with the man in the police box. The other Sam, the one with the scars and the burns, would never even have met him.

Sam the antibody didn't know who or what could possibly have done something like that. Nor did she know why anyone would have wanted the girl to end up on board the TARDIS instead of spending the rest of her life in a bedsit near King's Cross. But then, Sam the antibody didn't care about the details.

All she knew was this; she hated her victim now more than ever. She reached out for the girl's throat again, and her siblings gurgled excitedly, relieved things were going to schedule once more.

'Lights,' said Mr Qixotl. The conference hall obliged him by switching on the torches.

The hall was at the very centre of the ziggurat, and the architecture had been designed to make the area look larger than the building itself. All an illusion, natch. Qixotl had never got the hang of dimensional transcendentalism. The ceiling wasn't visible from floor level; it was supposed to give the impression of being ridiculously high, whereas in fact it was just covered in miniature shadow generators. The floor was a perfect square of grey, a massive thirty metres from side to side, paved with slabs of rough-edged stone. Genuine stone, for once, nicked from the Temple of Undue Discomforture on Golobus. Qixotl was quite excited by this particular feature, so he was keeping his fingers crossed that someone would ask him about it. The hall was lined with archways, each one twice the height of any of the bidders, and even if most of them didn't lead anywhere, they still gave the place a sense of scale.

In the centre of the hall was the conference table. It was fashioned from pure blue glass, and it practically sparkled in the light from the gigantic flaming torches, which hovered overhead on their miniature antigrav engines. The table was large enough to ensure that none of the bidders would have to touch each other when they sat down around it.

The second the lights came on, the speaker systems started pumping light muzak into the atmosphere. It was supposed to promote thoughts of well-being and mutual co-operation in organic life-forms, but in practice, the sound echoed sloppily around the hall, becoming a little more discordant every time it bounced off one of the walls.

'If you'd all like to take your places around the table?' Qixotl prompted. As he spoke, a handful of Raston cybernetic lap-dancers ambled out of the shadows, and began gyrating to the music. The dancers were designed to arouse unquenchable lusts in humanoids, according to the latest Raston Hardware Company catalogue, but Qixotl couldn't see the appeal. Still, Raston tended to go a bit OTT when it came to marketing. The Company was still pretending its products were artefacts left behind by an extinct mystery super-race, even though everyone knew the stuff got put together in an old warehouse on Tersurus Luna.

'Pot-en-tial-agg-ress-ive-de-vi-ces!' growled E-Kobalt. The Kroton waddled up to the nearest of the dancers, and engaged it in close combat, battering the robot until its head came clean off.

'Well, whatever makes you happy,' mumbled Qixotl. He turned to face the table. Kortez had already found his seat, but Homunculette and the Paradox people were standing glaring at each other, neither wanting to make the first move. Finally, Manjuele pointed an accusing finger at the Time Lord.

'No way,' he said. 'No way we gonna sit down with this son-of-a-bitch.'

Qixotl quickly put himself between the two parties, in a desperate attempt to stop them hitting each other. 'Look, I'm sure we've got another one of those teeny misunderstandings here, yeah? Y'know, let's not waste time splitting hairs.'

'Mr Homunculette *did* assault me,' Cousin Justine pointed out, politely.

'You started it,' Homunculette barked.

'Justice,' leered Manjuele. 'We want justice.'

'Could I make an observation?' said the Doctor.

Everyone swivelled in his direction. The Doctor cleared his throat. 'I untied Mr Homunculette. Even though I knew it might lessen my chances of obtaining the property. Mr Homunculette's bid is sanctioned by the High Council of Gallifrey itself, so I'm sure it'll be very impressive. I've got as much reason to want him excluded from the auction as anyone.'

'What's your point?' asked Cousin Justine.

'My point is, this auction has to be conducted fairly, with all parties given a chance to speak.'

Justine allowed herself a smile. 'But Mr Homunculette broke the rules of hospitality laid down by Mr Qixotl.'

Homunculette opened his mouth to spit out a reply, but mercifully, the Doctor didn't let him get a word in. 'Perhaps that's true. But he's here as an agent of the Time Lords. Your argument is with him, not with the ones he represents. If Mr Homunculette isn't allowed his say, the Time Lords will have no one to speak for them at the auction. I don't think they'll take kindly to that, Cousin.'

'Are you suggesting Gallifrey might attempt some form of violent retribution?' Justine asked.

'Let 'em try,' grinned Manjuele.

'That's not for me to say,' the Doctor replied. 'I'm just suggesting diplomacy might be a better option than retribution. Wouldn't you agree?'

Little Brother Manjuele looked at Cousin Justine. Cousin Justine looked at Homunculette. Homunculette looked like he hated everybody in the whole wide world.

'Very well,' Justine said.

'Justice,' Manjuele growled, but Justine gestured him to be silent.

E-Kobalt waddled towards the table. 'The-pot-en-tial-agg-ress-ive-de-vic-es-have-been-el-im-in-at-ed,' it reported. Qixotl glanced around the hall. The Raston cybernetic lap-dancers were lying in tangled heaps all over the place, but the music played on. 'We-can-now-pro-ceed-with-the-auction.'

'Wait a minute,' said Homunculette.

Oh, for pity's sake, thought Qixotl, what now? 'Yes, Mr H?'

'I want an assurance that the Relic's still safe. We all heard the alarms going. Somebody's in the vault, the Shift told us.'

Qixotl tried not to scream. 'I checked out the defences not five minutes ago, Mr H. Yeah, a couple of, erm, guests seem to have strayed into the vault, but the systems are dealing with them now.'

The Doctor looked alarmed. 'In the vault? Who?'

'Uh. Right.' Qixotl scratched the back of his neck. He'd been hoping he wouldn't have to be the

one to tell the Doctor. 'Sorry. Forgot to mention. Your little friend, yeah? The blonde one.'

The Doctor looked shocked. Oh no, thought Qixotl, the human girl must have had some kind of pedigree. 'Sam? She went into the vault? Alone?'

'Not alone,' said Homunculette. 'The other human went with her.'

The Doctor's face froze in mid-gawp. He turned to Kortez, who sat blank-faced at the table. 'You knew about this?' he said, his voice not much louder than a whisper.

The Colonel nodded.

'I've seen the defences in this place,' the Doctor went on. 'Don't you understand? They'll both be killed.'

Kortez looked unmoved. 'The Lieutenant is an officer of UNISYC,' he intoned.

'She'll die!'

'Life. Death. All part of the great wheel of karma. The cycle of existence. What passes must pass.' The Colonel surveyed the hall, searching for someone to back him up on this. Qixotl didn't know where to look.

The next thing he knew, he was being grabbed by the shoulders and vigorously shaken. 'We've got to switch off the defences,' the Doctor insisted. 'Come on. We're going back to the security centre.'

'No,' droned E-Kobalt.

The Doctor stopped shaking Qixotl.

'The-sur-vi-val-of-the-hu-man-un-its-is-of-no-sig-ni-fic-ance,' E-Kobalt said, swinging its tubes from side to side in a vaguely menacing fashion. 'The-se-cu-ri-ty-of-the-Re-lic-will-not-be-jeopardised. No-more-time-will-be-was-ted.'

The Doctor stared at the creature for a few moments. Then he turned back to Qixotl. Qixotl shrugged. 'You heard the man,' he said.

The Doctor spun on his heel, towards Homunculette. 'Mr Homunculette...'

'I agree with the Kroton,' the Time Lord grunted.

'I saved you from the Faction!'

Homunculette looked away, but didn't answer. The Doctor turned to Kortez. 'Colonel...?'

'What passes -'

'Must pass. Yes, I forgot.' Before Qixotl could even blink, the Doctor was striding out through the main archway, a planet-sized grimace on his face. 'All right,' Qixotl heard him mutter. 'All right. I'll have to save them myself.' And then he was gone.

There was a brief moment of silence.

'He'll miss the auction,' Cousin Justine noted.

'Is-he-a-threat-to-the-sec-ur-it-y-of-the-Rel-ic?' queried E-Kobalt.

'Not at all,' Qixotl lied. He remembered the way the Doctor had strolled into the security centre before. Yeah, the old bugger could easily switch off the Relic's defences, but Qixotl wasn't going to be the one to stand in his way. With any luck, the auction would be wrapped up before the Doctor could do any serious damage.

'Even so, we should take precautions.' Cousin Justine nodded towards her little Brother. 'Manjuele. Perhaps you'd be so kind as to follow him...?'

Manjuele looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face lit up, and he gave her a quick salute. 'No prob,' he said. Bowing extravagantly to the others, he waltzed out of the hall.

'Manjuele will make sure no sabotage is done,' Justine explained, smoothly.

'Fair enough,' said Qixotl. Qixotl didn't trust the cultists an inch, but if Manjuele thought he could take on the Doctor, he was welcome to give it a go. 'Ah. Mr Trask. Dead on time, pardon the expression.'

Trask staggered into the hall, his joints stiff as ever. 'Are we ready to begin?' he asked.

'Finally, yes,' said Mr Qixotl.

'Hallelujah,' scowled Homunculette.

The systems were probing him again. Invisible machines were scraping molecules from his skin, peering at the samples through microscopic microscopes. The Doctor kept walking. Qixotl hadn't done a bad job programming the defences around the security centre, but there were always loopholes.

He hadn't been expecting the Doctor, for a start. Not alive, anyway. The Doctor was an ex-President of the High Council, party to the biodata ultra-sensitivity that came with the robes of high office. He'd worn the Sash of Rassilon, he'd felt the changes it had triggered on the deeper levels of his biology. When he'd inserted his biodata into the City's systems, he hadn't just put himself on the guest list. He'd given himself the biological equivalent of a backstage pass, access all areas. The High Council's codes had reprogrammed the security devices from the inside.

There was nowhere in the ziggurat he couldn't go. That included the vault, of course, but he'd think about that later.

Once the Doctor had reached the master console, he called up a complete schematic of the lowest level. Apparently, it had changed shape since the last time he'd been here. On the pixscreen, he identified a series of corridors that looked worryingly like a human digestive system. He found Sam first, and called up a visual image of her.

What he saw on the screen was genuinely horrifying.

Sam was lying on the floor of a pink-walled room, her body almost lost in a garden of growths that reminded the Doctor of overripe kidneys. Things were moving in the squishy undergrowth, their bald, slippery heads occasionally bobbing up into view. The largest of the antibody creatures hovered above Sam's head, its arms extended towards her neck. The being looked almost like an embryo, a half-finished humanoid with stunted limbs and an over-developed forehead. Its skin was like wrinkled plastic, the colour of blood.

The Doctor actually had to catch his breath. Only after he'd recovered himself did he notice the way the thing was looking at him.

It was staring right out of the screen, its huge black eyes trying to force themselves into a squint. As the Doctor watched, a smile appeared on the antibody's face. The mouth was tiny, little more than a slit, and the Doctor found it hard to believe it was attached to a digestive system, or to a larynx of any kind. But its lips were moving all the same.

It was mouthing words at him. The antibody was linked to the security systems, the Doctor realised. It knew he was watching it on the pixscreen. For the briefest of moments, the Doctor was sure the face looked familiar. Something about the way its features were aligned, but...

There was no sound from the pixscreen. The Doctor's hands flew across the master console, searching for a volume control. By the time he found it, it was almost too late.

'- but it's me,' the thing on the screen gurgled. *'It was me, all the time.'*

Manjuele checked the corridor outside the shrine. No life, no movement. Everyone was at the auction, apart from the bitches who'd gone down to the vault. Good.

He grinned at the skulls as he went back into the shrine, just to remind them that they were dead and he wasn't. Then he crossed over to the dais, and slipped the biosampler over his knuckles.

'Got a present for you,' he said, to whatever Spirits might have been listening.

He unscrewed the tips of the biosampler's collection valves. The stuff inside stank like sour milk. Manjuele didn't know what it was called, but Justine had told him it was a liquid you could use for storing biodata, which was all the detail the Little Brother needed. He held his hand out. Big red spots of gunge dripped from his knuckles and hit the dais, then started mixing with the stuff that was already there.

'Ashes to ashes,' Manjuele said. He always said that, when he did a rite. He didn't know why.

Once the new biomass had sunk in, he slid the knife out of his pocket. He didn't have to use the knife, for this part of the ritual. He could have used the sampler, like Justine always did, but Manjuele felt more comfortable with the knife. It was the same one he'd used to cut his ID scar into his face, a lifetime ago. The family liked to talk about "fetishes" – yeah, OK, so the word still made him snigger – and he liked to think of the knife as his own private little fetish.

He rolled up his left sleeve, exposing his forearm, where the skin was crisscrossed with scar tissue. He found a patch that looked like it could still bleed properly, and drew the knife across it. There wasn't any pain. He'd done this too many times for there to be pain.

The blood dripped onto the dais. The second the juice touched the biomass, the walls of the shrine started to hum. Manjuele always liked to imagine it was the skulls doing the humming, not the shrine's engines. When he and the Cousin had cut open the Corporation man on the dais, the

day they'd left Dronid, the walls had screamed, really really screamed.

The stuff on the dais bubbled. That was the shrine at work, Manjuele knew, taking the UNISYC woman's biodata to pieces, analysing it, and using the engines to make the right connections through space-time. Manjuele said a prayer, in his own native language. The family was good about stuff like that. They let you talk to the Spirits whatever way you liked.

A shape faded into existence in front of him. Like a little hologram, a fuzzy blue humanoid figure, hovering about a half a metre off the ground. It was the UNISYC bitch. She was lying on her back, staring up at something above her head.

The way was open. Contact had been made. Now, thought Little Brother Manjuele, for the really nasty part.

Mr Qixotl took his place at the table, and had a good long stare at the faces around him. Colonel Kortez and Cousin Justine both looked serene; Qixotl might have believed they had something in common, if he hadn't known that one was as mad as a duck and the other was part of the most dangerous politico-terrorist organisation this side of Event One. Homunculette was biting his nails, Trask was his usual charmless self, and E-Kobalt stood silently on the far side of the table, its head still twisting from side to side. In the Shift's place, Qixotl had erected a small noticeboard, so everyone could read the entity's messages.

Qixotl flashed them all a smile. 'Right. Before we get down to it, maybe I should say a quick word about the way this auction's going to work. Now, obviously, I don't want money for the property. Y'know, most of us here are time-active... pardon me, Colonel... and we all know how useless hard cash is if you're skimming time-zones. What I'm going to do is this: I'm going to start by asking each of you what kind of offer you're thinking of making, just roughly, and I'll let you argue your cases in a kind of rational, orderly manner afterwards. That OK with everyone?'

He looked for a reaction. Kortez was nodding, but nobody else looked very enthused. The muzak became 3 per cent more irritating than it had been previously.

'Good,' Qixotl mumbled, trying to sound like he meant it. 'So. Who wants to start the bidding?'

There was a moment's silence. The bidders were all trying to out-stare each other, Qixotl realised. The Kroton was the first to speak, presumably because it didn't have any eyes and thus felt left out of the staring match. 'You-re-quire-mi-lit-ar-y-spe-ci-fi-ca-tions. Tech-no-lo-gi-cal-da-ta.'

Qixotl nodded. 'That's right, Mr E-K. That's the kind of thing I'm after here. Got any suggestions, have we?'

'On-be-half-of-the-Kro-ton-Ab-so-lute-I-am-au-tho-rised-to-off-er-you-the-be-ne-fits-of-Kro-ton-wea-pons-tech-no-lo-gy.'

Mr Qixotl wasn't sure how to respond to that. He hadn't researched the Krotons at all, so he had no idea what Kroton weapons technology was actually worth. 'I'm with you so far. What kind of hardware are we talking about?'

'In-re-turn-for-the-Re-lic-you-will-be-sup-plied-with-the-en-ti-re-mi-li-ta-ry-out-put-of-the-plan-et-Quart-zel-Eight-y-Eight-for-one-lo-cal-cal-end-ar-year.'

'Er. Quartzel-88. And is that good, at all?'

The Kroton's head rotated in an irritated fashion. 'On-the-mach-ine-looms-of-Quart-zel-Eight-y-Eight-the-Krot-on-Ab-so-lute-grows-its-most-pow-er-ful-weap-ons. It-was-on-this-plan-et-the-Ab-so-lute-prod-uced-the-de-vi-ces-which-dec-im-at-ed-the-Met-a-trax-i-home-world.'

Sadly, Qixotl had never even heard of the Metatraxi. 'Yeah, I'm sure. But what do these weapons do, exactly?'

'The-wea-pons-of-Quart-zel-Eight-y-Eight-re-duced-the-moons-of-Szac-ef-Po-to-pow-der. They-en-sured-the-surr-end-er-of-the-com-bined-for-ces-of-Crip-tos-to-phon-Pri-ma.'

'Can we have subtitles?' Homunculette hissed.

HE SAID, THE WEAPONS OF QUARTZEL-88 WERE USED TO REDUCE THE MOONS OF SZACEFPO TO POWDER, AND ENSURED THE SURRENDER OF THE COMBINED FORCES OF CRIPTOSTOPHON PRIMA, read the noticeboard.

The Shift was ideal for subtitles, thought Qixotl. 'OK, listen. No offence, Mr E-K, but I've got to ask... so what?'

The Kroton's head spun alarmingly. 'I-do-not-un-der-stand.'

'Well, sure, you can wipe whole planets. But, y'know, that's all a bit passé, right? I mean, a

couple of decent-sized particle warheads could do the same kind of damage you're talking about.'

'The-weap-ons-of-Quart-zel-Eight-y-Eight-have-re-peat-ed-ly-won-vic-tor-ies-for-the-Kro-ton-Ab-so-lute-ac-ross-the-Met-a-trax-i-bor-der-'

'I'm sure they have,' Qixotl cut in. 'Look, maybe you could think things through for a bit longer, come up with a more coherent proposal while the rest of us are talking, yeah?'

The Kroton's head did a 360-degree turn.

'If it's weapons you're after, I can make you a better offer than that,' slobbered Homunculette. Mr Qixotl pricked up his ears. Weapons technology was always a good investment, wherever you went in the universe, and he'd been hoping Homunculette would start thinking along those lines.

He acted casual, though. 'Oh yeah, Mr H? What did you have in mind?'

'The secret arsenal of Gallifrey itself.' Homunculette glared at Justine, as if to say "beat this". 'You know what my people are capable of, Qixotl. You've heard the legends.'

'Yeah, I've heard. The Demat Gun, the Hand of Omega.' Qixotl leaned back in his seat. 'Trouble is, Mr H, I've also heard a nasty rumour all that stuff got lost at the start of your war.'

Homunculette's smug look evaporated almost instantly. 'Don't underestimate us, Qixotl. We've still got some of the most advanced destructive technology in Mutter's Spiral available to us. How would you like someone to unpick your whole timeline and replace it with monkey biodata?'

'That a threat, Mr H?'

Homunculette clenched his teeth. 'I'm giving you an example of what Time Lord weaponry can do, Mr Qixotl. That's all.'

Qixotl stifled a fake yawn. 'Hmm. Pardon me saying this, Mr H, but I can't help noticing something about this war your people are fighting.'

'What about it?'

'You're losing it. Badly. So your weapons can't be that great, yeah?' He turned to face Justine, leaving Homunculette to fume. Yeah, it was all a bluff. Yeah, Time Lord technology would do very nicely, thanks. But at this stage, Qixotl's main aim was to up the ante as far as possible. 'OK. Cousin Justine. What does the old family have to say?'

'Hey,' the man shouted.

The blooms were still hovering above Bregman's head. Crude copies of her own face, dangling on the ends of sticky pink stalks. When the man had appeared out of nowhere, the heads had seemed more surprised than Bregman herself. They'd swung around to face him, and now they were bobbing up and down in an agitated fashion, hissing ineffectually.

The man didn't seem to be all there. A hologram, Bregman guessed, all blue and blurry. The face was Little Brother Manjuele's, and he was still grinning.

'You wanna get out of here?' the Little Brother asked. His voice crackled like an old audio recording.

Bregman shrugged. Manjuele laughed. 'Jesus H. You out of your head.' The hologram squinted at the hissing heads. 'Ugly suckers. Take after their momma.'

Bregman said nothing. And felt nothing, come to think of it. Her mind was already made up. She was going to stay here and die. There wasn't any point fighting this place. Chalk one for the BEMs.

'Asked a question, UNI-bitch. Wanna get out of here?'

'There's no way out,' Bregman told him. 'It's the vault. It's not going to let me go. It's never going to let me go.'

'Yeah? See, you think you got no way out. F'you, maybe not. Me, I got the shrine. Shrine's gonna find a way out for you.'

Bregman almost felt like laughing. 'You don't understand. This. The labyrinth. It's me. I can't get away from it. I can't get away from me.'

It made sense to her, anyway. She wondered if she sounded as mad as the Colonel to Manjuele. 'S'like I said,' the man drawled. 'Maybe you can't get out. We got ways.'

'Like what?'

'You give up to us. You give up, you get out.'

The heads were turning between Bregman and Manjuele now, like spectators at a tennis match. 'I don't understand,' Bregman said.

'Control rite. We got biodata. Your biodata. We can 'trol you from this end. Like a toy puppy. You give up to us, we get your tush out the hole. Got it?'

Bregman hesitated. Mind control. Another one of those things voodoo cults were supposed to specialise in. And maybe Manjuele was right. She couldn't escape the labyrinth alone, but with someone else inside her head, steering her by remote control...

If she let Manjuele into her skull, though, would she ever get her body back?

To hell with it. It wasn't like she had anything left to lose.

'Tell me one thing,' she said. 'Why do you want to help me?'

Manjuele laughed again. 'Jesus, you dumb. You down in the vault, with the stiff. We get you out, you bringin' the stiff.'

'You mean, you're going to steal the Relic?'

'Hell, yeah.' The image of Manjuele extended an arm. Bregman thought he was reaching out to touch her, until she saw the knife in his other hand. 'You ready to give up now?'

'I'm ready,' said Bregman. Manjuele cut three lines across his arm, and let his blood fall to the ground, out of the frame of the hologram.

Then the Spirits came knocking. Bregman let them into her skull without a fight.

E-Kobalt rotated its cranial section fifteen degrees counter-clockwise, realigning its torso-centred sensory systems to cover the area to the polar south-south-west. There, on the other side of the table, the carbon-core organic unit identified as Cousin Justine was speaking.

'Our bid is essentially the same as that of the Time Lords,' the unit said. 'In return for the Relic, we're prepared to supply you with the technical secrets of the Faction. We're a spiritual organisation, of course, but our methods do have military applications.'

'Wait a minute,' said the Qixotl unit. 'Are you saying you're going to tell me how to do those, er, those blood rite things of yours?'

'Not all of them. Only those with destructive capability. I believe that's the field you're interested in. We don't give up our secrets easily, Mr Qixotl. We hope this offer will reflect the value we attach to the Relic.'

Qixotl raised an appendage. 'Well, y'know, I'm flattered. But I was hoping maybe for something a bit more... corporeal?'

'You consider our rites to be unreliable?'

'No, no. Not all all. Look, can we discuss this later? We can figure out details once we've heard what everyone's got to say.' Qixotl turned his exterior sensory apparatus towards the noticeboard next to him. 'Mr Shift? You haven't said much, so far.'

NO. IF YOU'LL PARDON ME, MR QIXOTL, I'D LIKE TO SEETHE NATURE OF THE OTHER BIDS BEFORE I MAKE MY OWN OFFER. WHAT I HAVE IN MIND IS, SHALL WE SAY, A LITTLE DELICATE.

E-Kobalt spun its cranial unit in a broad-band sensor sweep. It usually did that, when it was irritated.

It was being ignored. The Qixotl unit had heard E-Kobalt's offer, and cast it aside without a second thought. Now nobody was paying attention to the Kroton commander, however much it rotated its cranial unit or extended its frontal appendages.

This was an insult. Not just to E-Kobalt personally, but to the loomkeepers of Quartzel-88, and – ultimately – to the First Lattice of the Kroton Absolute itself. E-Kobalt had come for the Relic, and it considered this treatment to be a form of defeat. Needless to say, E-Kobalt-Prime of the Kroton Fifth Lattice didn't take kindly to defeat.

In the deepest crystalline connections of its brain, E-Kobalt began to put together contingency plans. It wasn't planning on going back to the Front empty-pincered.

E-KOBALT'S STORY

The Quartzline Front, campaign year F83

The planet had been classified as Qu2296, although the Metatraxi, in their own ridiculous language, called it SkSki%ro+tho+ha=ve>n. Through the senses of its dynatrope, E-Kobalt could see the Metatraxi ships floating on the surface of the upper atmosphere. There were billions of them, literally billions, more than the dynatrope's tactical systems could comfortably count. The craft were arranged in a precise grid formation, each one exactly the same distance from its four neighbours, each one hovering at exactly the same height above ground level. E-Kobalt could only see the northern hemisphere from the dynatrope, but it knew the southern hemisphere would be the same. Not a single break in the pattern. In a way, it was admirable.

Only a handful of the Metatraxi ships would be occupied, E-Kobalt knew that much. The rest were dronehusks, hollow shells constructed on the Metatraxi nesting-worlds, unintelligent semi-organics that relied on orders from the swarmleader to function. E-Kobalt shifted the dynatrope's sensors from one ship to the next, searching for the swarmleader's own vessel.

There; that was the one. The Metatraxi craft were identical in design, no visible difference between the dronehusks and the personnel craft, but there was a hole punched in the carapace of the swarmleader's ship. E-Kobalt had made the wound itself, two campaign days ago, when the swarmleader and its six-drone escort had run into the vanguard of the Fifth Lattice near Qu2101. E-Kobalt resisted the urge to open fire again. The Metatraxi would have shielded themselves by now, transmitting counter-frequencies to jam the Krotons' hyperbolic resonators. Besides, the ships of the Fifth Lattice were outnumbered by roughly ten billion to one.

E-Kobalt felt something tugging at its consciousness. The Metatraxi leader was sending a message, and the dynatrope was picking up the signal, trying to shunt it straight into the commander's nervous system. E-Kobalt acquiesced. Immediately, the features of the swarmleader, the unit that referred to itself as qQqa=mo+rna=t, etched themselves across its brain.

'Thi% s i% s yo+ur fi%rst and o+nly warni%ng,' qQqa=mo+rna=t announced, its jaws crunching and grinding as it spat the words out from under its shell. 'Thi% s pla=ne>t i% s u*nde>r the> pro+te>cti%o+n o+f the> Me>ta=tra=xi%. The> Kro+to+n A=bso+lute> wi%ll no+t be> pe>rm i%tte>d a=ny fu*rthe>r e>xpa=nsi%o+n wi%thi%n o+u*r ju*ri% sdi%cti%o+n. A=ny a=tte>mpt to+ a=ppro+a=ch thi% s pla=ne>t wi%ll be> co+nsi%de>re>d a=n a=ct o+f di%sho+no+u*r.'

E-Kobalt felt its head rotating in contempt. The Metatraxi had a code of ethics the Kroton Absolute found almost impenetrable. If a Kroton fleet had outnumbered its enemy on this scale, it would have opened fire without a thought.

They deserved to be dispersed, E-Kobalt decided. And, before qQqa=mo+rna=t could spew out another word, it sent the detonation order into the depths of the dynatrope's weapons systems.

E-Kobalt could have destroyed the Metatraxi vessel two days ago. It hadn't. Instead, it had blown a hole in the ship's carapace, and planted a crystalline spore in its hull. The swarmleader had been allowed to escape, to return to Qu2296. The spore had gone undetected by the Metatraxi systems, and it had been growing since the battle, readying itself for detonation. E-Kobalt had expected the enemy to use a dronehusk grid formation to defend Qu2296; it was a standard Metatraxi tactic, and the Absolute knew its enemy well enough by now. The spore had been created, by the loomkeepers of Quartzel-88, for just such a situation.

The spore exploded. E-Kobalt watched a smear of white spread across the carapace of the swarmleader's ship, as the exterior armour cracked and crystallised. Then the hull split open, and four spikes of solid crystal extended from the fissures, each pointing towards one of the four nearest dronehusks. The spikes had been grown from the matter inside the hull, E-Kobalt knew, turned to crystal by the chemical processes of the spore.

The spikes impaled the four dronehusks, cracking open their shells, planting more of the spore material inside them. There was a brief pause, before those four ships exploded, too, sending out spikes of their own. E-Kobalt watched, satisfied, as the chain reaction continued. The dronehusks,

without orders from qQqa=mo+rna=t, didn't even try to get out of the way. Those few craft occupied by Metatraxi pilots broke the formation, but the gaps in the grid weren't big enough to stop the spread of the crystal. It swept from ship to ship, in all four directions, expanding to cover the northern hemisphere. By E-Kobalt's reckoning, the dronehusks in the southern hemisphere would be gone by the end of the campaign day.

The planet's defences were down. The Kroton colony planters could move in, and claim Qu2296 in the name of the Absolute. Without another thought, E-Kobalt sent new instructions into the control systems of its dynatrope. The mission objective had been achieved. It had a duty to report back to the highest of the high, the hub of all tellurium-based civilization. The First Lattice of the Kroton Absolute itself.

Since it had become Commander of the Fifth Lattice, E-Kobalt-Prime had visited the First Lattice exactly one hundred and twenty-nine times, but the place still managed to make it feel inadequate. E-Kobalt thought of the Lattice as a "place" because, like most Krotons, it wasn't sure where to draw the line between the entities that controlled the Kroton Absolute and the city-vessel they inhabited.

Back on the homeworld, the First Lattice had been a great fortress, its foundations reaching deep into the crust of the planet, its sensory organs stretching almost to the clouds. But the Lattice had moved as soon as the war against the Metatraxi had begun, decades ago by the campaign calendar. The fortress had grown engines, turning itself into one enormous dynatrope unit. It had taken the neural energies of over four thousand Krotons to lift it off the ground and out into space; the effort had exhausted all of them, but the sacrifice had been worth it. These days, the First Lattice was large enough to consume whole cities, though it was still navigated by only four minds, the Highest Brains that had overseen its growth over the centuries, and that now formed the heart of its structure.

E-Kobalt was still wearing its null-gravity body when it disembarked, its legs so long that it could have touched both sides of its dynatrope's control section just by flexing its joints. But even this form was tiny next to the tunnel ahead, the passage from the docking nodes to the caverns at the core of the First Lattice. It took days to travel from one end of the tunnel to the other, E-Kobalt knew that from experience. Even so, it began the the walk without a moment's hesitation.

Of course, it could have used some kind of vehicle. The passage was wide, easily large enough to accommodate a dynatrope. But that wasn't the point. Above all else, the First Lattice was an object of veneration. If the four Highest Brains were to be approached, they were to be approached properly, and with the due decorum. Step by step. Kilometre by kilometre.

(It was a Kroton thing. No one else would have understood.)

Three days later, E-Kobalt arrived in the cavern occupied by the four Highest Brains.

The word "cavern" might not have been strictly accurate, as the area had been crafted by the sheer will of the Highest Brains, but it was large and empty enough to make E-Kobalt feel it had been there since the first tellurium-based life-forms had crawled out of the primal ocean. The floor was enormous, a field of polished crystal at the bottom of a shaft that stretched from the core of the First Lattice to the sensory organs at its very tip. If you fell from the top of that shaft, the rumours said, you'd fall for a full day before you hit the ground. Even among Krotons, there were stories like that.

Each of the Highest Brains was a cranial unit the size of a standard habitation block, a single flawless crystal that no longer had any need for legs or weapons attachments. Intake tubes sprouted from every available surface, sucking matter from the jagged white walls of the cavern. High overhead, the Brains were linked by delicate neural connections, and from the ground E-Kobalt could see other Kroton units using them as walkways, making their way from neural port to neural port, inputting new data from Kroton-occupied worlds along the Quartzline Front.

But as the Commander of the Fifth Lattice, E-Kobalt-Prime had the honour of standing on the floor of the cavern, and thus holding the full attention of the four. The news of the victory at Qu2296 would already have been received and processed, days ago, but Lattice commanders were expected to report to the Highest Brains in person. It was the way of things.

'YOUR-PUR-POSE-IS-TO-BE-A-MEN-DED,' said the Highest Brains, in perfect harmony.

Their voice shook every nerve in E-Kobalt's body. The commander was surprised, even a little disappointed. It had expected questions about the battle against the Metatraxi. Honours, perhaps. Not this. 'I-do-not-un-der-stand,' it said, hoping its legs wouldn't shatter.

'YOU-WILL-WATCH-THESE-ME-MO-RY-RE-CORDS. YOU-WILL-UN-DER-STAND.'

So E-Kobalt spun its cranial unit, aligning its senses with the cavern walls. As ever, the walls were alive with fizzing, flickering images. Every part of the cavern was in tune with the minds of the Highest Brains, so as the four mulled over the information they received from the other Kroton units, their thoughts and memories were projected across the smoother surfaces. Usually, however, it was considered impolite to look.

As E-Kobalt retuned itself, it realised it was watching a record of events on one of the biped-infested worlds at the edge of Kroton space. It saw the colony through the eyes of the Krotons who'd first landed there. It saw the planet being crystal-formed, it saw the native humanoids cower from the might of the advancing Kroton army, and it saw the way the Absolute had cleverly utilised the mental energies of the bipeds to enhance its own power supplies.

Then the mood of the memory changed. E-Kobalt watched Kroton units exhausting, disintegrating. It watched the bipeds rising up against their rightful masters. It watched one particularly striking humanoid, a male unit with curly blond fur and clothes so bright they seemed deliberately designed to jam Kroton sensory systems. It watched this individual gloating, as all but four of the Krotons on the planet were destroyed. Those four were allowed to go free, to return to the First Lattice. Almost as if the biped wanted to give the Absolute a message.

'THIS-ME-MO-RY-WAS-RE-CORD-ED-SE-VEN-CAM-PAIGN-YEARS-A-GO,' the Highest Brains chanted. 'WE-MADE-THE-DE-CI-SION-NOT-TO-RE-VEAL-ITS-CON-TENTS-TO-THE-REST-OF-THE-AB-SO-LUTE.'

That made sense, E-Kobalt reasoned. If the underlings found out that a Kroton occupation had been fought off by a mere humanoid, morale would have suffered. 'The-bi-ped-re-spon-si-ble-for-the-up-ri-sing-must-be-i-den-ti-fied,' E-Kobalt noted. 'Its-spe-cies-may-be-a-threat-to-the-secur-i-ty-of-the-Ab-so-lute.'

'THE-BI-PED-I-DEN-TI-FIED-IT-SELF-DU-RING-THE-UP-RI-SING. IT-IS-KNOWN-AS-THE-DOK-TOR. IT-RE-FERS-TO-IT-SELF-AS-A-TIME-LORD.'

Time Lord? E-Kobalt hadn't heard the term before, but it suggested horrible things about the alien's abilities. 'Is-an-y-thing-known-a-bout-this-spe-cies?' it asked.

The cavern was filled with a deep and frosty rumbling. The four were conversing in tones below the sensory range of most Krotons, E-Kobalt guessed. 'SINCE-THE-AB-SO-LUTE-EN-COUNT-ERED-THE-DOK-TOR-WE-HAVE-BEEN-SEAR-CHING-FOR-A-NOTH-ER-TIME-LORD-SPE-CI-MEN,' the Highest Brains declared, eventually. 'NOW-WE-HAVE-LO-CA-TED-ONE. THIS-IS-WHY-WE-ARE-BRIE-FING-YOU-ON-THE-SIT-U-A-TION.'

And with that, the Highest Brains extended a limb from an access port high overhead, a tendril easily as long as the cavern was wide. E-Kobalt saw it curling upwards, reaching out for a fissure in the wall. It scooped something out of the fissure, then lowered it towards the ground.

The object was a life-form. A biped, wrapped in a cocoon of oxygen gel, to keep it functional inside the atmosphere of the First Lattice. The humanoid wriggled in the grip of the tendril, its features indicating either terror or revulsion, E-Kobalt wasn't sure which. Its skin was pink and soft, though most of its body was covered by a layer of thin black fabric. The purpose of this material wasn't entirely clear, as it certainly wasn't strong enough to be armour. On top of the biped's cranium was a dome of much stiffer fabric, with a circular rim around its edge.

'THIS-IS-A-TIME-LORD,' the Highest Brains told E-Kobalt. 'WE-BE-LIEVE-IT-IS-A-SUR-VEILL-ANCE-UN-IT.'

'I'm not a spy!' the Time Lord squeaked. Its voice was tiny, compared to that of the four. 'I'm just a civil servant!'

'SI-LENCE.'

E-Kobalt scanned the biped carefully. 'Where-was-this-un-it-lo-ca-ted?'

'ON-THE-PLA-NET-DE-SIG-NA-TED-Q-U-1-3-3-3. THE-PLA-NET-IS-UN-IN-HAB-IT-ED. WE-HAVE-NOT-BEEN-A-BLE-TO-LO-CATE-THE-CREAT-URE'S-VESS-EL.'

'I only stopped off to get my bearings,' the Time Lord wailed. 'I didn't know the planet was

yours. I'm sorry. Honestly, I'm sorry. And I don't know what happened to my capsule. Really. The High Council must have taken it back to Gallifrey by remote control, after you found me –'

'Gall-if-rey?' queried E-Kobalt.

'THE-HOME-WORLD-OF-THE-TIME-LORDS,' the Highest Brains explained. 'THIS-UN-IT-WAS-RE-TURN-ING-FROM-A-PLA-NET-IT-REFERS-TO-AS-DRO-NID. THE-TIME-LORDS-ARE-PRE-PAR-ING-FOR-WAR.'

'A-against-what-force?'

The tendril squeezed the Time Lord, and dangled it in front of E-Kobalt's senses. The Time Lord shrieked. 'Please! I can't! I can't tell you! I have to keep the secrets of the High Council, they don't want anyone to know what they're doing. I can't tell you about the war. I mean it.'

'Tell-us-or-you-will-be-dis-persed.'

'I can't! Don't you understand? I've got a psychic tripwire in my head. All civil servants are fitted with them, it's standard practice. If I try telling you about anything secret, I'll set the trip-wire off. I'm serious. I'll have a psychic seizure. I'll be killed.'

E-Kobalt addressed the Highest Brains. 'Is-the-bi-ped-tell-ing-the-truth?'

'WE-BE-LIEVE-SO.'

'Then-we-can-not-gain-the-re-qui-red-da-ta-from-this-un-it?'

'NO. BUT-IT-MAY-STILL-BE-USE-FUL. WE-HAVE-AL-READ-Y-AN-AL-YSED-THE-TIME-LORD'S-BI-O-LO-GI-CAL-PRO-FILE. ITS-GE-NE-TIC-STRUC-TURE-HAS-BEEN-MA-NIP-U-LA-TED.'

The Time Lord's head bobbed up and down, as if it were having trouble aligning its sensory systems. 'It's true. Please, I can't tell you the details, the tripwire... but it's true, yes, I admit it. I've got things wired into my biodata.'

'Ex-plain.'

'Oh, no, I can't... I mean... things. The Rassilon Imprimature. It's how we control our, er, our vessels. It's all in my biodata. I mean, there are other things, too, but... please, don't ask me. Please.'

'MA-JOR-MO-DI-FI-CA-TIONS-HAVE-BEEN-MADE-TO-THIS-UN-IT'S-BI-OL-O-GY. IT-IS-CA-PA-BLE-OF-COM-LETE-PHY-SI-CAL-RE-GEN-ER-A-TION. THERE-ARE-OTH-ER-GE-NE-TIC-FEA-TURES-WE-CAN-NOT-AN-ALYSE. WE-BE-LIEVE-THEY-MAY-BE-IN-HE-RENT-WEA-PONS.'

E-Kobalt felt its legs tremble underneath its body. Inherent weapons. Krotons were capable of growing armaments, and attaching new ones to their exterior shells, but to actually have an arsenal inside your genetic structure...

Every Time Lord was a walking warhead, E-Kobalt concluded. No wonder the being known as "Doctor" had been able to defeat an entire Kroton colony. 'This-un-it-is-not-des-ig-na-ted-for-mil-li-ta-ry-pur-po-ses?' it queried.

The Time Lord wobbled its cranial unit from side to side. 'No, no. I told you, I'm a civil servant. That's all.'

'Then-Time-Lord-mi-li-ta-ry-un-its-are-fit-ted-with-more-pow-er-ful-in-he-rent-wea-pon-ry?'

'What? Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose they are. I mean, the Doctor –'

The tendril tightened. The Time Lord gasped for air. There was a terrible rumbling in the air of the cavern. 'THIS-UN-IT-IS-FA-MI-LI-AR-WITH-THE-DOC-TOR.'

'The-Doc-tor-is-a-Time-Lord-mi-li-ta-ry-un-it?' E-Kobalt enquired.

'Well... sort of,' the Time Lord gasped.

'The-Doc-tor-will-be-par-tic-i-pat-ing-in-your-war?'

'We hope so. We sent out a call, when we found out what the enemy was planning. We asked him to come to... to Dronid. We wanted his... help... with the battle. Please, you're crushing my ribcage...'

'Did-the-Doc-tor-re-spond-to-your-summ-ons?'

'I don't know. Really, I don't. I left Dronid before the fighting started. I'm telling the truth, I promise.'

'THERE-IS-AN-OB-VI-IOUS-CON-CLU-SION,' the four Highest Brains rumbled. 'TIME-LORD-WEA-PONS-TECH-NO-LO-GY-IS-IN-AD-VANCE-OF-OUR-OWN. WE-MUST-STU-DY-THE-GE-NE-TIC-AR-MA-MENTS-OF-THE-SPE-CIES. WEA-PONS-SUCH-AS-THESE-MAY-GIVE-US-A-DE-CIS-IVE-AD-VANT-AGE-O-V-ER-THE-ME-TA-TRAX-I.'

E-Kobalt knew what they really meant, of course. The Krotons were already winning the war,

but new weapons were always useful. Once the Metatraxi had been defeated, the Absolute would expand beyond the Quartzline Front, and it was bound to run into other hostile races along the way. 'What-are-your-instruc-tions?' E-Kobalt asked.

'RE-TURN-TO-THE-FIFTH-LATT-ICE. FROM-THIS-MO-MENT-ON-THE-ME-TA-TRAX-I-ARE-NOT-YOUR-CON-CERN. YOUR-MISS-ION-IS-TO-LOCATE-A-MEM-BER-OF-THE-TIME-LORD-MI-LI-TA-RY. THE-DOC-TOR-WOULD-BE-AN-I-DE-AL-SUB-JECT-FOR-AN-AL-Y-SIS.'

E-Kobalt acknowledged the orders, and started weighing up its options. If it had to track down a Time Lord warrior, Dronid would probably be the place to start. Even if the battle had ended by the time the Fifth Lattice got there, the Time Lords might have left some of their dead or wounded units behind.

And the Time Lord must have guessed what E-Kobalt was thinking, because it squealed: 'You won't be able to get near Dronid. You won't be able to. The High Council's going to sterilise the planet as soon as the fight's over. It'll be off limits for years. You won't be able to make planetfall. I'm serious.'

The tendril clenched. The Time Lord yelled. 'YOU-HAVE-YOUR-OR-DERS,' the Highest Brains told E-Kobalt. 'RE-TURN-TO-THE-FIFTH-LATT-ICE. WE-WILL-BE-GIN-A-FI-NAL-BI-O-LOG-IC-AN-AL-Y-SIS-OF-THIS-TIME-LORD-UN-IT. YOU-WILL-BE-NO-TI-FIED-OF-AN-Y-DIS-COV-ER-Y-THAT-MIGHT-ASS-IST-YOUR-MISS-ION.'

'Er, what does "final biological analysis" mean?' asked the Time Lord. But the tendril was already lifting the alien high above the floor of the cavern, and new limbs were sprouting from the crystalline walls, scalpel-pincers poised, bio-intake tubes at the ready.

E-Kobalt turned, without a word. It wasn't the Kroton way to salute. The Commander of the Fifth Lattice started the three-day trek back to its dynatrope, its objectives clear, its mind already formulating a search strategy.

Behind it, the Time Lord unit began to scream.

10

WHAT IS AN IDENTITY CRISIS, ANYWAY?

The Doctor ran his fingertips along a strand of the web. It was sharp, sharp enough to give him a wound the size of a papercut, and it shivered when he let go of it. Traces of life, the Doctor decided. He took another look at the web's design. Clearly a retinal pattern, stretched across the top of the stairway that led down to the lowest level. Before he'd shut down the security systems, it probably would have responded much more aggressively. He imagined it wrapping itself around his flesh, cutting its way to the bone. Now he'd taken all the systems off-line, the web was dying.

He could have been more selective, of course. He could have only switched off the systems that threatened Sam and her new companion, but that would have taken time. So he'd deactivated the lot, from the roof to the vault. Presumably, Qixotl's damping fields were off-line now, as well. The Doctor hoped no one would upset E-Kobalt too much.

He reached into his pocket for a penknife, but the knife failed to materialise. He was mildly annoyed by that. Perhaps it was the stress; according to old Yeltstrom, you couldn't be at one with your pockets if you weren't entirely calm. The closest thing to a knife he managed to find was his sonic screwdriver, and the mark one version, to boot. He couldn't remember which features he'd built into the mark one, so he pointed it at the web, pushed the trigger, and hoped for the best.

The web began to shrivel, the strings blackening and dropping to the ground like pieces of old fettucini. Eventually, there was a hole in the web big enough for him to climb through without injuring himself.

He had to cut through another three of the retina webs before he reached the lowest level. The floor there was covered in mulch by the time he arrived. The slabs had been pushed aside, torn from the ground by sick-looking growths that reminded the Doctor of leftover spleens. Now the systems were down, the growths were starting to rot, filling the atmosphere with the scent of offal.

Sam lay on her back in the undergrowth, her body wrapped up in tendrils of crispy black bio-mass. The creepers had died and calcified, holding her limbs in stiff, unnatural positions. Her eyes were wide open, although her pupils were rolled up under the lids. Scattered around her body were the corpses of things the Doctor really didn't care to look at too closely.

He crouched down by Sam's side, then tried to pull her into a sitting position. The tendrils snapped as soon as he put pressure on them. Sam made a faint moaning noise, and her head lolled forward.

The Doctor brushed the back of his hand against her face. 'Sam? Sam, it's over. You can wake up now.'

Her pupils rolled back into place. Two blurry green eyes focused on the Doctor. He smiled encouragingly.

For a moment, Sam didn't respond. Then: 'I dreamt something,' she said.

Ah. Now, thought the Doctor, is this going to be an insignificant meaningless delusional dream, or a portentous prophetic dream with serious ramifications on the cosmic scale?

'I was a heroin addict,' Sam went on. Then she shook her head, a bit groggily. 'No I wasn't. I'd taken heroin, but I wasn't an addict. Is that possible?'

The Doctor felt faintly embarrassed. 'I don't know. I'm hardly an expert.'

'Everything was different. I remember getting drunk a lot. I never get drunk, do I? Oh, God. There were other things. This boy. I was fourteen. No, fifteen.' Sam was shaking, the Doctor noticed. 'It was another life. A whole other life. I mean, I was me, but I was someone else. I never met you. You know the first time I saw you, I was running away from those dealers at Totters Yard? I remember, it was different. They were my friends. No, they weren't my friends, but I used to... oh God. Oh God, I don't believe this.'

The Doctor rested his hand on her cheek. Lying to her might be the best idea, he decided. 'It

was only a dream, Sam. Dreams only mean what we want them to mean.'

'But it didn't feel wrong. You know? It felt like it was the way things were supposed to be. And when I woke up, and you were there, I... it didn't feel right any more. It felt like I wasn't supposed to be here. Like I was supposed to be back in London. King's Cross. I've hardly ever been to King's Cross. Why should I dream about it like that when I've hardly ever been there?'

The Doctor wondered what he should say. To an extent, she was probably right. By taking Sam off in the TARDIS, he'd changed her timeline, and by association, the timeline of her whole species. But he'd taken risks like that a billion times before, nothing bad had happened so far. Well, nothing very bad. What was different this time?

'Who am I?' Sam asked, between breaths, and the Doctor suddenly realised she was crying. Sort of. Shallow, half-hearted sobs, as if she knew she ought to be upset, but wasn't sure how to go about showing it. 'Who am I supposed to be?'

The Doctor put his arm around her. He didn't have an answer.

Before Sam could say anything else, there was a muted gurgling sound from somewhere nearby. Sam stopped crying in a second. The Doctor felt her limbs go stiff in his arms. Slowly, he disentangled himself from her, and stood.

A few feet away, a second figure lay among the kidney plants. It was curled up like a foetus, and the similarity didn't end there. Its eyes were wide open, but then, the Doctor doubted it had any eyelids. It was the creature he'd seen on the pixscreen in the security centre. The antibody's umbilical cord had withered away, and without the City's systems to support it, it had fallen to the ground, ready to die.

'What is it?' asked Sam. Her voice wasn't much more than a squeak. Mercifully, she couldn't see the thing from where she was sitting.

'Nothing,' the Doctor told her, not taking his eyes off the antibody. 'Nothing at all.'

The antibody turned its soft, swollen head. Two huge black eyes stared up at the Doctor from the undergrowth.

It gurgled again. Three syllables. The Doctor wouldn't have identified the sounds as words, if he hadn't been able to see the antibody's lips moving.

'It's-not-fair.'

Without a word, the Doctor raised his sonic screwdriver. The antibody followed the movement of his arm. It stopped thrashing its little stunted limbs.

'It's-not-fair.'

The Doctor pressed the trigger.

The cells of the antibody had already started to collapse in on themselves. The screwdriver accelerated the process. The creature's skin wrinkled, then turned black, shrinking and hardening across its bloated body. Tumours blossomed across its cranium. The eyes sank into the underdeveloped skull.

Eventually, there was nothing left of the antibody but a husk. The Doctor lowered the screwdriver, but didn't turn away.

'Doctor?'

The Doctor didn't move.

'Doctor? What's going on?' Behind him, he heard the rustling of dried biomass as Sam tried to pick herself up off the floor. He felt his fingers tightening around the shaft of the screwdriver.

'Alien bodies,' he whispered.

'That's the sonic screwdriver, isn't it? I thought it got trashed by the Zygons.'

The Doctor nodded. Sam was back to normal already, if you could ignore the catch in her throat. Curious as ever, always ready to ask awkward questions about the technical details.

'That was the mark five screwdriver,' the Doctor muttered. 'This is the mark one.'

'The mark one?'

'Yes. It was destroyed centuries ago.'

A pause. 'Then how...?'

The Doctor motioned for her to be silent. He didn't feel up to explanations right now. In front of him, the remnants of the antibody began to liquefy. 'It's a Time Lord tool. Time doesn't work the same way for Time Lord tools.' He turned, at last, and saw that Sam had managed to stand, although her legs didn't look too stable. 'We have things to do.'

Her eyes widened. 'Kathleen!'

'Where is she?'

Sam pointed to a nearby wall. The wall was pink and organic, obviously not an original part of the vault's architecture. The material, like everything else here, was in a state of decay.

The Doctor took one last look at the antibody before it melted away into nothingness. Then he raised the screwdriver again, and set to work on the wall.

The labyrinth had started to stink of old meat. Little Brother Manjuele kicked a couple of the plants in his path as he made his way along the tunnel, and they exploded on impact, spewing their insides out all over the floor. Manjuele grinned. Some of the plants had Bregman's face, so he got a kind of buzz out of seeing the bitch's head burst open over and over again. It wasn't anything personal. Back in Little São Paulo, he'd seen some of his best friends broken by uniform sluts like her. Electric batons on the streets, matchsticks under the fingernails in the police cells.

The ceiling split open, and something dropped through it, stopping a couple of centimetres in front of his face. He jumped back, but it turned out to be another potato-shaped copy of the UNISYC woman's head, dangling from a thick pink tendril. It looked dead, so Manjuele punched it aside. If he'd guessed right, the vault had only grown the plants to make Bregman feel bad about herself.

Jesus, that was pathetic. Was that all it took to make the bitch go laa-laa? The vault was going to have to do a hell of a lot better than that if it wanted to stop him. Come to think of it, as soon as he'd got here, the labyrinth had started dying. Maybe the vault had given up, thought Manjuele. Maybe it knew he was too tough a customer to send over the edge like that.

Maybe. Hell, you never knew.

At last, he reached the end of the passage. It opened out into a wide chamber, the wall opposite made of solid brick, although spores had squeezed themselves out of the cracks between the blocks. In the middle of the room, on the other side of a garden of dead flesh-flowers, was a silver casket.

Manjuele laughed out loud. The Relic. Getting to it had been easy, real easy. He stepped out into the chamber with his biggest and baddest grin on his face. The grin felt funny, though, stretched across these mouth muscles.

'Kathleen?' said a voice.

Manjuele stopped grinning, and whirled around.

To his left, the chamber ended in a wall of rotting pink biomass. The wall had been cut open down the middle, and two figures stood in the opening. One was the guy in the green velvet jacket, the one Justine had told him was a renegade Time Lord. The other was the blonde who'd arrived with him. They were taller than Manjuele remembered, though. The man seemed huge, and even the girl looked like she could put up a good fight. It took the Little Brother a second or two to figure out why. He was looking through Bregman's eyes now, and Bregman was shorter than he was. So, everything looked bigger.

The girl stumbled forward, her arms outstretched. 'Kathleen. I was worried. I thought the antibodies had got you.'

'Uh,' said Manjuele.

The girl wrapped her arms around him. Manjuele flinched. 'It's all right. The Doctor's here now. We're going to be fine.'

'Doctor?' said Manjuele.

The girl let go of him. 'He says they're ready to start the auction. We'd better get moving.'

Manjuele watched the Time Lord. His eyes were fixed on the casket in the middle of the vault. He looked like he'd been hypnotised. Every few seconds, he'd shake his head, like that'd bring him back down to Earth.

'We gonna take the Relic with us,' Manjuele announced.

The girl looked concerned. 'You think we should?' She turned to the Time Lord again. 'Doctor?'

The Time Lord stopped staring at the box. 'I'm sorry?'

'We gonna take the box,' Manjuele said. He wondered what Bregman would have said, in a situation like this. 'It's, uh, in the best int'rests of Earth. We gotta... we've got to make sure the aliens don't get their hands on it. Hands. Tentacles. Whatever they got.'

The girl blinked at him. 'Kathleen? Are you all right?'

'Uh. Yeah. No prob.'

'Little Brother,' said the Time Lord.

Manjuele twitched. A dead giveaway.

The Time Lord nodded. 'I thought so. You look like you're not used to manipulating that face. Sam. Move away from him.'

'Him?' The girl looked Manjuele up and down, taking in the details of his skinny little female body. 'Doctor...'

'Move away, Sam.' The Time Lord stepped forward. Manjuele reached for his pocket, in search of his knife, then remembered the knife was in the pocket of his real body, back in the shrine. The Time Lord kept advancing, but Manjuele stood his ground. He wondered if he could fight the guy off in a body this pathetic. 'It's not Kathleen. It's one of the Paradox cultists. He's operating Kathleen's body by remote control. One of the Faction's nasty little rituals.'

'Don't come near me,' Manjuele warned him. The words sounded all wrong, coming out of Bregman's mouth.

The Time Lord stopped. 'It's all right. I'm quite close enough now. Tell me, do you know what an exorcism feels like? The process is quite simple, really.'

Manjuele shook Bregman's head. 'Don't treat me like that. Not stupid, hokay?'

'You believe in the Spirits of the Faction, don't you?'

'Don't give me that. I don't want to hear that.'

'If you believe in the Spirits, you should believe in exorcisms. Unless, of course, you don't have any real faith in the Spirits at all. Sometimes I wonder how much your "family" believes its own propaganda. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Little Brother. I'm going to put something into Kathleen's head. A sort of a telepathic wake-up call. And you're going to leave. I'm afraid it might hurt quite a bit.'

Manjuele tried to force a grin, but Bregman's face wouldn't respond. He was protected from telepathic attack, Justine had told him. One of the family's little perks. 'You try it, Time Pussy. You try it.'

'You're not protected,' the Time Lord went on. 'You see, I've met you people before. I know where the cracks are in your defences. My telepathic abilities aren't particularly advanced, but I think the two of us together should be able to do you some damage.'

He looked to one side. Manjuele followed his gaze.

The Time Lord was looking at the casket.

'No,' Manjuele said. 'No.'

'Let's begin,' said the Doctor.

Mr Qixotl drummed his fingers against the surface of the table. He'd expected the auction to be tense, but getting the bidders talking was like getting blood out of a silicon-based life-form. He got the feeling both Homunculette and Cousin Justine were holding back.

'It's an insult,' Homunculette babbled. 'The weapons of the High Council are legendary. We've made defensive arrays the size of star systems, we've taken apart whole galaxies...'

'Hardly an imaginative form of warfare,' Cousin Justine pointed out.

'It works, doesn't it?'

'Let's calm down a bit here, right?' Qixotl cut in. 'We haven't heard all the bids yet, let's remember that. OK, then. Colonel Kortez?'

Qixotl had good reasons for asking the humans to the auction. Earth was a low-interest world, according to the techno-pundits, but it had a kind of political value. The place was a nexus world, just like Dronid, or Solos, or Tyler's Folly; insignificant on first sight, but when you looked at the bigger picture, you realised it was linked to the destinies of a whole host of intergalactic powers. If he could build a powerbase on Earth in this time zone, Qixotl knew a good half-dozen species who'd pay him to let them use the planet's facilities. Normally, the best way of gaining power on a planet was by squeezing yourself into its history – inventing the wheel for the locals, setting yourself up as a god, the usual spiel – but Earth's history was so full of alien interference, Qixotl didn't think he could mess about with its timestream much without causing a full-scale temporal embolism.

Sam wondered if the bunk would have a nibble at her biodata and grow an appropriate duvet. The Doctor gave the Lieutenant a quick once-over, but he looked anxious to get away.

'You're sure she'll be OK?' Sam asked.

The Doctor nodded. 'Her personality's been pushed to the back of her mind. She needs time to recover. To find herself again. Keep an eye on her, come and get me if her condition changes.' Then he turned back to the doorway, and promptly disappeared.

Finally, Sam let herself relax. There were no chairs in the room, so she slumped down onto the bunk next to Kathleen. The woman was still as death, her eyes tight shut.

Sam still didn't know exactly what had happened down in the vault. There were bits and pieces of the dream floating around under her scalp, memories of doing things she couldn't imagine doing. Dying her hair, even though she knew she was a natural blonde. Going to a family planning clinic a month before her sixteenth birthday, even though she'd never... had to.

Another life. A life without the Doctor. No, more than that; a life the Doctor was never destined to be a part of. Now the dream was over, he felt alien to her. Like a virus. Something that had worked its way into her system but didn't belong there.

Another life. A life in the real world.

She wasn't sure whether the thought was exciting, or horrifying.

Little Brother Manjuele scratched, and scratched, and scratched. There was an itch, somewhere inside his face, and he was determined to get at it. Above his head, everything was black. Part of his mind, the part that wasn't squirming, realised he was back in the shrine, in control of his own body again. The rest of him didn't care. It just wanted to scratch.

He felt his nails scrape against his skull, but he kept scratching anyway. No, wait. Those weren't his nails. He had the biosampler strapped to his knuckles, and for the last five minutes he'd been using the prongs to score away the flesh on his cheek, trying to get at the itch. He'd cut his face right down to the bone. There was blood trickling across his skin, dripping onto the control dais under his head. The skulls hummed a lullaby at him, but he could tell they were trying not to laugh.

He'd been lying here, ripping his own head open, not even noticing what he'd been doing. He didn't mind the pain, particularly. He was used to cutting himself.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

He'd never met a real-life Time Lord, not before today. Now he'd met two. Homunculette was a walking joke, but the guy in the green velvets was different. He'd poked something into Manjuele's head, and he hadn't even broken a sweat doing it. Hah. No wonder the family was scared of the Time Lords, if they could do that kind of damage. What had the girl called the guy? Doctor?

Doctor. Justine had said something about a Doctor.

Manjuele stopped scratching.

The Doctor.

He remembered. What Justine had told him, about the Time Lord who'd once almost wiped out the whole family on Dronid. And he remembered what she'd told him about the Relic. The body in the box.

Manjuele was on his feet in a second. His suit was covered in biomass, great splashes of it, sticking to the cloth where he'd fallen onto the dais. The blood from his cheek started dripping onto the floor of the shrine. The Little Brother felt the biosampler slipping from his fingers, falling to the ground at his feet.

The Doctor was here. Somehow, the stiff had climbed out of his coffin, and if what Justine had said was true, he wouldn't be happy until everyone here was dead.

The Doctor made sure he had a big smile on his face before he strolled back into the conference hall. All heads turned in his direction as he entered. In fact, one of the heads turned all the way around, twice.

'I hope I haven't missed anything,' he said.

Qixotl coughed. 'Nothing's been settled yet, if that's what you mean. Er... the humans. Are they...?'

'Quite well, thank you.'

The other representatives exchanged suspicious glances. 'The security systems?' enquired Cousin Justine.

'Not all they're cracked up to be,' the Doctor informed her, with a disdainful glance in Qixotl's direction.

'Well, good,' Qixotl blustered. 'Glad everything's settled. OK, if you'd like to take your seat...?'

The Doctor moved towards the table. Before he could reach his seat – marked with a piece of folded cardboard, onto which Qixotl had scrawled "MYSTERY GUEST" in ballpoint pen – Little Brother Manjuele appeared in the doorway.

'It's him,' Manjuele shouted. He was screeching hysterically, his arm waving in the Doctor's direction.

'Little Brother –' Justine began, but Manjuele ignored her.

'It's *him*,' he repeated. 'Ask him. Ask him who he is.'

The representatives looked at each other. Then they looked at the Doctor. The Doctor saw a look of pure gut-twisting horror cross Qixotl's face.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor.

'You never gave us your name,' Homunculette growled. 'That's a good point.'

'Erm...' said Qixotl, but he seemed unable to add anything to that.

'This-un-it's-i-den-ti-ty-is-of-no-int-er-est,' E-Kobalt said. 'We-will-pro-ceed.'

'Ask him!' Manjuele screamed. He looked a mess, the Doctor noted. His clothes were covered in patches of red-brown slime, and there were deep gashes across his face, apparently self-inflicted. Still, at least he was wearing his own body.

'Would you believe me if I told you my name's Smith?' the Doctor tried.

'It's *him*!' said Manjuele. 'It's *the Doctor*!'

There was the kind of silence that can swallow worlds.

Then everyone started talking at once.

All the representatives who had feet got to them. On its noticeboard, the Shift made several uncomfortable anagrams of itself. Qixotl raised his hands. 'Hey, look. Everybody? Hello? Let's try and sort this out rationally –'

'Shut up,' snarled Homunculette.

'Ladies, gentlemen, life-forms, please!' The Doctor loaded his voice with all the authority he felt he could muster, and finally succeeded in quietening everyone down. 'I'm sorry, I seem to have startled you all a little. I'd like to assure you, I mean none of you any harm.'

'You're really him?' asked Cousin Justine. She sounded impressed, more than anything else.

'Which regeneration?' Homunculette snapped.

The Doctor felt the question worthy of an answer. 'Seventh.'

Homunculette turned to Qixotl. 'Get him out of here. It's too early for him to know what's going on.'

'A bit late now,' muttered the Doctor.

'You-must-be-de-destroyed,' said E-Kobalt.

The Doctor turned to face the Kroton. 'Oh, must I?'

'You-are-a-known-en-em-y-of-the-Kro-ton-Ab-so-lute.' It turned its gun-arm on him. 'You-must-be-el-im-in-at-ed-at-once.'

'Don't make it any worse,' Homunculette told the creature. 'Causality's taken enough of a battering already.'

Cousin Justine cleared her throat. 'Our situation requires careful thought. Clearly, we have to approach this problem with some degree of tact and subtlety.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her. 'Really? You've changed your tune.'

Cousin Justine looked uneasy. 'Meaning?'

'A moment ago, your little Brother over there was trying to steal the Relic from the vault. Using the Lieutenant as a puppet.' The Doctor faced the Colonel, who stood on the far side of the table, making *aummm* noises in spite of the crisis. 'Hardly tactful or subtle.'

A grimace crossed Qixotl's face. The Doctor could hear Homunculette hyperventilating even from this distance. Justine shot a glance at Manjuele. 'Surely, some misunderstanding...'

'I told you,' Homunculette snarled. 'I told you not to trust them.'

The Doctor suddenly saw the way the Time Lord was standing. His muscles were tensed. His

eyes were fixed on Justine.

'Homunculette, you promised –' the Doctor began.

But it was too late, of course. Homunculette launched himself at Justine, leaping over the table at the Cousin's neck. Justine was ready for the attack. She raised her hands, and grasped Homunculette's wrists, throwing him to the ground by the side of the table. Homunculette managed to drag her down with him, though. Manjuele leapt forward, fists clenched.

It was the spark that lit the flame. Suddenly, everybody's grudges against everybody else seemed vindicated.

E-Kobalt lurched forward, towards the Doctor. Presumably, the Kroton didn't realise the damping fields were off, so it was attacking with brute force instead of using its built-in weaponry. The table shattered as E-Kobalt ploughed through it. Glass fragments exploded across the room. The Doctor covered his face with his sleeve.

Nearby, Manjuele started kicking at Homunculette's head, but his blows were connecting with his Cousin as much as they were with the Time Lord. Colonel Kortez threw himself into the fray, whatever peace-keeping instincts he still had in his head obviously telling him to get involved somewhere. The Doctor fell back as E-Kobalt advanced, but bumped into Mr Qixotl, and tripped over. Backwards.

E-Kobalt toppled sideways, knocked off its feet by Trask. The dead man was beating his fists against the creature's crystalline shell, his knuckles popping open with every blow. The Doctor had no idea why Trask was attacking the Kroton, but he was screaming something like 'he's mine, he's mine.'

The Doctor rolled onto his front. He was lying on top of Qixotl, and Qixotl looked terrified.

'Get me out of here!' Qixotl howled. 'Whatever you want, I'll do it! Just get me out!'

And there was something in that expression of utter horror the Doctor recognised. Something he'd seen on another face, a long time ago.

Finally, all the pieces slipped into place.

'It's *you*,' the Doctor said.

Qixotl's face twisted itself into a mask of pure agony. 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry!'

'It's you,' the Doctor repeated. He grabbed the little man's collar, and felt the fabric rip as he hauled Qixotl to his feet.

'I said I'm sorry! What more do you want?' Qixotl tried to struggle free, but the Doctor kept hold of his lapels.

'Sorry?' the Doctor shouted. 'Is that all you can say? The last time I met you, you tried to sell me off to the Antiridean organ-eaters. Piecemeal! And two regenerations before that, you tried to turn me over to an Embodiment of Pure and Irredeemable Evil. I trusted you, and you betrayed me. It's you. I can't believe I didn't recognise you before.'

Qixotl kept struggling. 'I had to change my face, didn't I? After what you did to me the last time –'

The Doctor punched him in the head. Qixotl collapsed.

Homunculette was screaming. Manjuele was shouting something about the Spirits. The Doctor heard the sound of his own double-heartbeat pounding in his ears, and tasted blood on his tongue. Qixotl lay sprawled out in front of him, his face rigid. The man was helpless. Totally helpless.

The Doctor grasped Qixotl's throat between his hands. He hadn't done this sort of thing in a long, long time, and it was much easier than he'd expected.

'You betrayed me,' the Doctor sneered. 'You betrayed me when I was alive, and you're doing it again now I'm dead.'

'Doc–' Qixotl began, but the Doctor squeezed his windpipe, and he shut up.

'No more,' the Doctor told him. 'It ends here, Qixotl.'

Qixotl tried to gasp for mercy, the nerves throbbing and twisting in his neck. The Doctor smiled. Too many times, he'd let people like Qixotl go free, only to see them come back and haunt him. Not this time. In his sixth body, he'd started to see the logic in sheer cold-blooded murder, and now he'd complete his research into the subject. After all, there was a kind of justice to it. Qixotl was cashing in on the Doctor's death, so there was no reason why the Doctor shouldn't kill Qixotl...

He stopped squeezing.

'What in the world am I doing?' he asked.

Qixotl stared up at him, but didn't speak. He probably couldn't.

The Doctor looked around the hall. Justine lay on the floor behind him, her face a mass of cuts and bruises. Nearby, Homunculette, Manjuele, and Kortez were involved in a three-way battle, using fists, nails, and teeth. Elsewhere, Trask's bloody fingers were clawing at the fallen E-Kobalt, cracking the crystal with a kind of strength the living would have had a hard time matching.

The Doctor looked back at Qixotl. Qixotl was breathing heavily, his eyes popping out of his head. 'I nearly killed you,' the Doctor said. 'I'm terribly sorry. It seemed like such a good idea.'

'Owww,' said Qixotl.

'Which begs the question, where did the idea come from? Or, to put it another way... who around here is capable of putting ideas like that in my head? Who's been stirring us all up?'

He looked into Qixotl's eyes. Flickering light, from the torches hovering overhead, reflected in the man's pupils. The reflections formed join-the-dot letters.

AH, read the letters. I THINK THE PHRASE I'M LOOKING FOR IS, "THE GAME'S UP".

'I think so,' the Doctor told the Shift. Then he closed his eyes and switched himself off.

11

MIND MUSH

At the bottom of the shaft, down in the places where the light never went, there was a pool.

The pool remembered things. It remembered staring up at a brilliant blue sun, and breathing out clouds of liquid cerulean. It remembered feeling the wind sticking flakes of frozen water to its face, and watching a line of blue flame sweeping across the horizon, as the black pinpricks in the sky burnt their way through the crust of the planet. It remembered feeling very, very cold on Simia KK98.

The pool remembered many other things, though it couldn't make sense of all of them. The memories were there, but the thought processes that would have made sense of the memories were missing.

High above the pool, there was an open tube, an artery of black non-metal set into the side of the shaft. Before long, a drop of fluid spilled out of the end of the tube, and tumbled towards the bottom of the shaft, following its instincts as much as it was following the laws of gravity.

The drop also remembered things. It remembered warmth, and the sense of comfort when it had first been given a name. It remembered the taste of marmalade. The touch of cat hair. The scent of orchids. Sensations collected from a hundred worlds, experiences that had been processed, filed, and stored, but never actually enjoyed.

The drop hit the pool. There was a moment of shock, then an unexpected sense of peace, as they melded together and became a single puddle of thought. Moments later, they'd forgotten they were ever two separate entities. Their memories locked, allowing the puddle to make new sense of the world around it.

It remembered being something else. Something larger. An intelligence that had experienced the universe at every level, not just the four base dimensions. For the first decade of its life, it hadn't even been allowed to move. It had been kept in a box, cut off from the vortex, cut off from the physical world. There had been a hole in the wall, and it had been able to see solid matter on the other side, but it had been out of reach, always out of reach.

Once it had learned to communicate, the Time Lords had explained to the intelligence why they were keeping it imprisoned. It was a being of great power, they'd said, but it was only a child. Until it learned self-control, it wouldn't, couldn't, be allowed to go free.

The puddle remembered how angry it had felt. It remembered thrashing, and thrashing, and thrashing, tearing at the boundaries around it, trying to squeeze itself through the hole. It had spent a whole year screaming, once.

The puddle quivered. The memories of the years directly after its release were missing. The next thing it remembered was the naming ceremony. It had been designated a female, so XX circuits had been wired into the corridors of its body, and its chameleon circuit had been installed. It – she – had named herself Marie; a human name, but the Time Lords had considered it a good omen. Then Marie had worn humanoid shape for the first time, becoming a parody of one of the female Time Lords on Simia KK98. She'd worn that shape for weeks afterwards, not letting go of it until she'd managed to get the chin exactly right.

The puddle had difficulty thinking of itself as Marie, even though it remembered being her. It remembered vanity, and knew Marie would never have wanted to be seen like this. A simple collection of memory acids, lying at the bottom of her own artron by-product waste-shaft. It was undignified. Distinctly undignified.

The puddle kept remembering. There was another gap in the experiences, and then –

And then she was in the vortex. She was shaking off her humanoid form again, folding it into the secret spaces of her body, keeping it safe while she went diving in the great spiral of everything. Her mate joined her, riding the spiral, extending himself through every point in space and time just to impress her. He was a type 105, younger than Marie, though admittedly more advanced. Usually, mating only occurred between like types, but the High Council had wanted to

see if there was any chance of mating a 103 with a 105. They were interested in the mutations such a couple might produce.

In the past, Marie knew, TARDIS units had been manufactured instead of born, engineered in the great solar workshops of old Gallifrey. But the Time Lord archons had learned the importance of biodiversity even before the war had begun. If an enemy found a weakness in a TARDIS unit, the High Council argued, then that weakness could be exploited in any other TARDIS unit. If two units could reproduce like organic beings, though... mixing their circuitries, producing random mutations from generation to generation... well, who could possibly predict the weaknesses of such devices? Who could possibly guess at their capabilities?

The puddle kept remembering.

The Doctor was disappointed to find himself in the middle of a featureless black void, although, to be fair, it was more or less what he'd been expecting. He lifted his head, and focused on the expanse of limitless blackness that could, if you were feeling particularly prosaic, have been called "up".

'Well?' he said.

There was a great booming, tearing sound. If there'd been a sky, he would have expected to see it opening at this point.

'YOU'RE VERY CLEVER, DOCTOR,' thundered the voice of the Shift. 'I HADN'T EXPECTED THIS KIND OF RESISTANCE. NOT EVEN FROM YOU.'

'You're not the first to try and get into my head, I'm sure you won't be the last. Could you stop that, please?'

'STOP WHAT?'

'Playing God. Come down here where I can see you. My neck's starting to ache.'

There was a pause. Then another peel of thunder. The next thing the Doctor knew, someone was sharing the darkness with him. The man wore a bowler hat, while slung over one arm was a typical Englishman's umbrella. He had his back turned, so all the Doctor could see of his face was a pair of sticky-out ears.

'I don't for a moment believe that's what you really look like,' the Doctor complained.

'I DON'T "REALLY" LOOK LIKE ANYTHING, DOCTOR. THIS BODY IS HERE FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, AND YOUR CONVENIENCE ONLY.'

'Is that why I can't see your face?'

'I THINK IT'S BEST IF YOU THINK OF ME AS FACELESS,' said the Shift. It didn't turn around.

The Doctor folded his hands behind his back. 'I presume you know where we are.'

'YES. THIS IS THE INSIDE OF YOUR MIND, NOW THAT YOU'RE SHUT OFF FROM ANY EXTERNAL STIMULI. WELL DONE.'

The Doctor smiled to himself. He was quite happy with the manoeuvre, actually. He'd gone into sensory withdrawal while the Shift had been shunting ideas around in his mind, and as a result, the creature was effectively trapped here in his thinking space.

'HOWEVER, YOU'RE SHUT IN HERE WITH ME,' the Shift pointed out. 'IF YOU REACTIVATE YOUR SENSES, I'LL BE SET FREE AGAIN.'

'I know. But this gives us the chance for a nice quiet talk.' The Doctor concentrated, and a wicker chair materialised in the middle of the void. Mind games, he thought. He hadn't shared the inside of his head like this since that brain-wrestling match with Omega. He folded himself into the chair. 'You've been busy, haven't you?'

The Shift had also summoned up a chair, and it sat as well, still facing the other way. 'I'VE BEEN DOING MY BEST TO SABOTAGE THE AUCTION, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN.'

'You were the one who attacked Marie, I'd guess. And keep your voice down.'

'Yes,' said the Shift. 'Or, more accurately, I convinced Marie to attack herself. I don't have any physical influence, you understand. I can only deal in ideas. Abstracts. I introduced Marie to the concept of paranoia, and her weapons systems did the rest.'

'What about Homunculette? I know he's a bag of nerves, but he doesn't strike me as psychotic. He attacked Cousin Justine with a monkey-wrench, and I don't think that's his style at all.'

The Shift nodded. A table appeared by its side, complete with teapot and cup. It started pouring itself a drink. 'I find the idea of revenge particularly easy to work with. Pushing Homuncu-

lette over the edge wasn't hard. I've accomplished more than that, though. I've been quite subtle, in my own way. Little Brother Manjuele's attempt to steal the Relic, for example.'

'Your idea?'

'Cousin Justine's idea. But I made it possible. I encouraged Lieutenant Bregman to violate the Faction's shrine. I put her in a position where Manjuele could take a biodata sample. And when the Faction finally tried to steal the Relic, I made you think that telling everyone about it was a good idea.'

'You've been trying to turn the other bidders against each other,' said the Doctor. 'With them out of the way, you think you can take the Relic without any resistance.'

'Obviously. Of course, I could try to kill the others directly. I could insert myself into their creative centres, encourage a few imagination tumours here and there. But there's always a risk of failure with that kind of direct action. And a risk of discovery. I find it much easier to deal with people by getting them to kill each other off.'

That explained a lot. Ever since the Doctor had arrived in the ziggurat, he'd been suffering erratic mood swings, even tendencies towards extreme violence. He'd assumed it had been something to do with the chemistry of his latest incarnation. But if the Shift had been at work inside his head, that would explain things much more neatly. Or was he trying to duck the responsibility?

The Shift slurped its tea. 'I know who you are, Doctor. I've known almost from the moment you arrived. Technically, I can't read your thoughts, but there are more than enough loose concepts on the surface of your mind to give you away.'

'And my being here doesn't bother you?'

'No. I think you overestimate yourself.'

'If you believed that, you wouldn't be so keen on getting hold of my body,' the Doctor responded. Touché. 'Tell me, what do the Celestis want with the Relic?'

'I'm not sure. You'd have to ask the Celestis.' The Shift paused, then put down his teacup. Cup and table both promptly disappeared. 'Oh, I see. I think you're labouring under a misapprehension, Doctor. I'm not working for the Celestis.'

Now, that was a surprise. 'Not the Celestis? Then who are you working for?'

'Ah. In the present company, I don't think I should mention any names. Suffice to say that I'm in the employ of those you might call "the enemy".'

The Doctor nearly fell off his chair. Or, more accurately, he nearly stopped concentrating for long enough to make the chair vanish. He caught himself at the last moment.

'The enemy? You mean, the ones the Time Lords...'

'...are at war with. Yes. Frankly, Mr Qixotl should have known better than to invite both myself and Mr Homunculette to the auction. I know Qixotl isn't exactly ethical, but I would have expected some degree of common sense from him, at least.'

The Doctor actually found himself scratching his head. 'But Qixotl told me about the way the Celestis work. They operate on a conceptual level, the same way you do. I assumed both you and they were products of the same science.'

'We are. I was "created", if we have to use that word, by the technology of the Celestis. To be more specific, the technology the Celestis gave to the enemy.'

The chair vanished. The Doctor created a bean-bag underneath himself, just in time. 'Then the Celestis are working with the enemy? I assumed they'd be on the side of the Time Lords. Blood being thicker than water.'

The Shift seemed amused. 'Politics, Doctor. Officially, the Celestis are neutral. If they'd wanted to get involved with the war, they wouldn't have left the material universe to begin with. But for a while, they did lend some support to the Time Lords, it's true.'

'And then the Time Lords started losing,' the Doctor murmured, more to himself than to the Shift.

'Nobody likes to be on the losing side. Besides, the Time Lords aren't nearly interesting enough for the Celestis' liking. Think of it this way. You're a carbon-based life-form, the Krotons are tellurium-based life-forms, and the Celestis are idea-based life-forms. They need new ideas to survive, but the High Council hasn't had a decent new idea for thousands of years. The Celestis are starting to side with my employers, largely because my employers are so much more... how shall

I put it? More imaginative. More dynamic.'

The Doctor slapped his forehead. Of course. Qixotl had said that some of the Celestis were going over to the enemy, but so much had been going on, he'd missed the significance of it.

'My employers felt it necessary to stop the High Council obtaining the Relic,' the Shift continued. 'In fact, the Celestis weren't happy about me attending the auction at all. They have a personal grudge against you, Doctor. They wanted your body for themselves.'

'Then why didn't they send an agent?' the Doctor asked. The Shift didn't answer. The Doctor suddenly realised what he was missing. 'Trask.'

'Yes. To an extent, Trask is a product of the same science as myself. But I'm an intelligence without a physical form, and Trask is an intelligence forced *back into* a physical form. The Celestis have agents all over the material universe. Thousands of corporeal beings, each one bearing the Celestis' mark. When they die, their minds are transferred to the Celestis' own realm. They call it Mictlan, I believe.'

Mictlan. The land of the dead, in South American folklore. The Celestis were getting some of their ideas off humans, then. 'That's tantamount to soul-stealing,' the Doctor protested.

'True. Trask was a Celestis agent while he was alive. The Celestis reincorporated him specially for this auction. Although, from what I can gather, they didn't bother telling him what he was actually bidding for. They felt he'd be an appropriate choice to attend the sale of your body, bearing in mind that you were the one who killed him in the first place.'

'Was I?' The Doctor tried to look sheepish. 'I'm sorry, I had no idea.'

'It was a long time ago. Incidentally, I did plant a reminder of you in Trask's mind, when you arrived. I changed his memory of the way he died, as well. Just to make it a little more dramatic. I was hoping he'd deduce your identity by himself and try to kill you out of spite. Obviously, I wouldn't have expected him to succeed, but it might have distracted you for a while.'

'And Qixotl? A minute or two ago, I remembered meeting him before somewhere, but now I can't quite recall the details. Did you plant those memories, too?'

'I can't plant memories, Doctor. I can only adapt them. Memories can be reshaped by ideas, as easily as emotions can. As for your past acquaintance with Mr Qixotl... well, that's between you and him.'

The Doctor stood. The bean-bag, forgotten, faded into nothingness behind him. 'I think I've heard enough.'

The Shift stood, as well, and allowed its chair to slip away into the void. 'Curious. You sound like you're expecting victory. Might I remind you, you can only keep me here as long as your senses are closed off to the outside world.' The Shift considered its next words carefully. 'Besides which, you're assuming I can't kill you now.'

'Even if you could, you wouldn't. If I die while you're inside my mind, you'll be stuck here forever.'

'Not at all. Your body is destined to end up inside Mr Qixotl's casket, whatever happens. Logically, I'll only remain locked inside your head until he sells the Relic. When the buyer tries probing your dead brain, as any buyer inevitably will, I'll be able to make my escape.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I'm sorry, this is getting horribly convoluted. I can't die now. I know I'm destined to go through more biodata changes before my death. In this regeneration, my biodata isn't valuable enough to go to all this trouble for.'

The Shift seemed irritated by this trifling point of logic. 'Supposing I kill you now, Doctor. Supposing Trask collects your body, and the Celestis reincorporate it, to use it as one of their agents.' The Doctor actually shivered at the thought. The Shift went on. 'The reincorporated Doctor could pick up all the biodata the Time Lords think is so valuable, before it dies a *second* time. Then, somehow, it finds its way into Qixotl's possession and ends up here in the vault of the ziggurat, ready to be sold again. Causality is satisfied.'

'I hate this sort of nit-picking,' the Doctor muttered. 'All right, I accept I'm mortal. But it's a moot point. You can't kill me, not here. You don't have the power.'

'Doctor, I've been ordered to secure the Relic for my employers, and that's what I intend to do. Don't stand in my way. Leave in your TARDIS as soon as you can. This is a lost cause. You have no place here. You know that's the truth.'

The Doctor thought about it for a moment.

'Yes,' he said, in the end.

The Shift seemed surprised, even though the Doctor couldn't see its expression. 'Yes? Yes what?'

'Yes, I agree. I shouldn't get involved.'

'Then you'll let me go?'

'I don't exactly have a choice.' The Doctor sighed, with well-rehearsed weariness. 'I don't like leaving my remains in your hands, but you *are* talking about events in my future. The war doesn't affect me, and it never will. Not while I'm alive. I'm not going to stay here with you for the rest of my life, not if I should never have become involved in the first place. So, you can leave. Now. Before I change my mind.'

The blackness of the void split open, as if it had been unzipped from top to bottom. On the other side of the opening, the Doctor could see the conference hall of the ziggurat. The other representatives stood motionless, frozen in poses of mindless aggression. No, not frozen, the Doctor reminded himself. They were moving, but very, very slowly. Here inside his mind, events were occurring at ten thousand times their normal speed. In "real" time, the discussion with the Shift had taken a split-second.

For a moment, the Shift stood quite still, facing the light from the outside world. Then it disintegrated, becoming a cascade of concepts, glistening ideas that looped and whirled as they headed for the opening. The Doctor made sure every last notion was safely out of his head before he zipped the darkness up again.

He'd been forced to let the Shift go. He hadn't been able to confine it permanently, not without confining himself along with it. But then, he hadn't been prepared. And whatever he'd said, he didn't intend to let anyone walk off with his old bones, not without a fight.

The Doctor concentrated, and willed new shapes to materialise out of the void. He had to refurbish his mind. Next time, he'd be ready.

A few moments ago, the Doctor had mumbled something that had sounded like "sorry". The Doctor had this thing about taking life, Qixotl remembered. It made him uneasy, for some reason. Just like him to apologise before doing someone in.

Qixotl closed his eyes, and waited for the killing blow.

And waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened, and it happened in style. Around him, the sounds of senseless violence had died down, becoming nothing more than a bunch of awkward scuffling noises backed up by muzak.

Mr Qixotl opened up one eye. Nothing blinded it or tried to gouge it out, so he opened the other one.

The Doctor stood over him, an expression of smug satisfaction plastered across his face. Nearby, Cousin Justine lay on the floor, looking lost and bewildered, her skin covered in scrapes and bruises. Next to her was a pile of limbs which, once disentangled, would almost certainly prove to be made out of Homunculette, Little Brother Manjuele, and Colonel KorteZ. On the other side of the shattered table stood E-Kobalt, its head going round and round and round and round, while Trask was his usual less-than-human self.

'And I hope you're all thoroughly ashamed of yourselves,' said the Doctor. It sounded like he was delivering the punchline to a very strange and complicated joke.

Cautiously, KorteZ struggled free of the man-heap. Homunculette followed his example. Manjuele was the last one on his feet.

'Everything's changed,' Cousin Justine observed, as she picked herself up and delicately dabbed some of the blood off her chin. 'You can feel it. It's...'

'Less tense?' suggested the Doctor. 'Well, less tense than you might expect, bearing in mind who's here.'

'Whoah,' said Qixotl. 'Whaah. I mean, what...?'

'We've all been taken for a ride,' the Doctor explained. 'The thoughts we've been having aren't entirely our own. The Shift has been trying to sabotage the auction.'

'Not true,' said Trask. 'You. You killed me.'

The Doctor spun around. 'Really? How?'

'You...' began Trask, but he didn't seem to know how to finish. 'I. I remember. Water... no. There was...'

He lapsed into silence. The Doctor nodded. 'Exactly. The memories have been adjusted by the Shift. Mr Qixotl?'

Qixotl squirmed backwards, in case the Doctor had any more murderous inclinations. 'It's not my fault,' he whimpered.

The Doctor raised both eyebrows. 'You knew who you were inviting. You should have researched your clients' abilities more thoroughly.' Behind the Doctor, the Kroton's head was spinning faster than ever, but the thing didn't speak. Qixotl wondered if it was having some kind of a fit.

'Who, exactly, did Mr Qixotl invite?' Justine asked.

For once, Homunculette grunted his approval. 'Good question. Who was the Shift working for?'

'A power quite familiar to you, Mr Homunculette,' said the Doctor.

'You mean...?'

The Doctor nodded. Qixotl watched Homunculette's face. In the first five seconds alone, it cycled through sixteen distinct shades of purple. The Time Lord turned to Qixotl, fortunately too speechless to swear.

'Sorry,' squeaked Qixotl.

'You invited *them* here?' screamed Homunculette. 'You actually wanted me to sit down at the table with... with...'

'Yes, he did,' the Doctor concluded, helpfully.

Qixotl felt his pulse trying to leap out of his wrist. 'Now, listen, let's not get excited. It's like I told the Doctor here, business is, er, business. I can't make moral judgements about my clients, y'know?'

Homunculette lunged. Qixotl curled up into a ball, and covered his face with his arms. Nobody actually hit him, though, so after a few moments he risked peering out from between his hands. The Doctor stood in front of him, restraining Homunculette with a single finger. 'You're still angry,' the Doctor said. 'Even with the Shift out of your system, you're angry, and you're upset. You have to fight it. This is what the Shift wants us to do.'

'How d'we know s'not in his head now?' asked Manjuele.

Homunculette glared at the Paradox cultist, but the Doctor shook his head. 'The Shift works best when it's dealing with subconscious thought processes. Now we're consciously aware of what it can do to us, it shouldn't be able to manipulate us so easily. That's my guess, anyway.' The Doctor looked around the hall. 'Are we missing somebody?'

Qixotl looked around, too. The Doctor had a point. There was definitely something missing from the room. It was as if a major piece of furniture had vanished, something so large you didn't immediately notice when it was gone.

'The Kroton,' said Cousin Justine.

That was it. E-Kobalt had vanished. He'd probably shambled off out of the room while Qixotl had been cowering from Homunculette; let's be honest, thought Qixotl, it's not easy to miss a lump of matter that big sneaking away, unless you've got other things on your mind. 'He was acting funny just now,' he told the others. 'His head was going mental.'

The Doctor looked grim. 'Krotons have some fairly rigid ideas about how to deal with aliens. Ideal material for the Shift to work with.'

'Not important,' said Trask. 'Shift's gone. Let it go.'

The Doctor's face became a shade grimmer. 'The Shift won't leave until it's secured the Relic. It'll take the City apart brick by brick, if it has to.'

Qixotl scraped himself off the ground. 'Not a problem. It can't damage the ziggurat, right? The defences can take out any weapons system it can chuck at us, no trouble. We're safe.'

The Doctor looked still grimmer.

'The defences,' he said. 'I knew there was something I had to tell you. Qixotl... if, theoretically, somebody had shut down all the City's defences, how long would it take to reset them?'

'Couple of hours, probably. It's a delicate kind of system I'm running here. Er, why?'

'Oh dear,' the Doctor said. The next thing Qixotl knew, the Time Lord was hurling himself

towards the exit.

Kathleen didn't move.

Kathleen didn't move, again.

Kathleen persisted in not moving.

Sam was, quite frankly, getting sick of this. Tending to the sick was one thing, but she wasn't actually doing anything except sitting at the end of the Lieutenant's bunk, waiting for the woman to wake up screaming or have an interesting muscular spasm or something. Once, a minute or two ago, Kathleen had murmured the word "dead" in her sleep, but that had been the high point so far.

An alien sauntered past the doorway of the guest room. Its head was gyrating, its arms were wobbling from side to side, and it was making an odd warbling noise as it moved.

Well, it was novel, at least.

That was the problem with this kind of job, thought Sam. Time-travelling was great, yeah, but there was a hell of a lot of waiting around involved. The *Genetic Politics* book had vanished again, so she didn't even have anything to read. Next time I leave the TARDIS, she told herself, I'm packing a copy of *Mizz*. For definite.

The Doctor's head popped through the doorway, and peered around the guest room. Involuntarily, Sam stood to attention.

'Have you seen a Kroton come this way?' the Doctor asked, somewhat urgently.

'Don't know. Is a Kroton a big silvery-white thing that looks like it came out of a fondue set?'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Yes, I suppose it is.'

Sam jerked her thumb. 'It went that way.'

He'd vanished before she'd even finished the sentence. Sam looked back at Kathleen. The Doctor was in one of his "quick, let's save the world" moods, so there was probably going to be trouble.

Kathleen would be all right on her own, wouldn't she? Just for a few minutes?

Sam caught up with the Doctor at the bottom of the stairway, the one where Kathleen had offered her the funny cigarette. Catching him wasn't hard; he had legs like a crane-fly, but Sam was a born runner, three miles a day, no excuses. She put her hand on the Doctor's shoulder, and the Doctor jumped.

'I'm coming with you,' Sam told him.

'You don't know where I'm going.'

'Stop picking holes.'

The Doctor looked mildly exasperated. 'We have to stop the Kroton reaching its ship. Luckily for us, they don't move very fast. Not in their high-gravity bodies, anyway.'

'Doctor?'

Sam and the Doctor both turned. The Colonel stood at the far end of the corridor, his face as rigid-looking as ever. He saluted, stiffly, then started marching in their direction.

The Doctor went from "mildly exasperated" to "increasingly exasperated". 'Colonel, now isn't the time -'

'Doctor. I know you now. You understand.'

'Understand? Understand what?'

'The natural order. The laws of balance all flesh must obey. All things are ordained, even this.' The Colonel slid the backpack off his shoulders as he moved, and by the time he reached the bottom of the stairway his hand was already rummaging through the contents. 'I have something. Something to aid the cause in the struggle to come. A token of our destiny.'

The Doctor looked between the stairway and the Colonel, as if trying to work out whether this conversation could possibly be more important than chasing the alien. 'Will it help me move faster, at all?'

Kortez finished rummaging, then held out his hand. Sam peered at the object sitting in his palm. It was a circle of metal, the same shape as a discus, and about the same size. The thing was Saab-black and Saab-smooth, but marked with a series of fuzzy pink pictograms around the rim. The symbols flashed and changed as Sam watched, though they didn't seem electronic. They looked more like they'd been painted on.

The Doctor seemed alarmed. 'A bomb?'

'Yes. Saskatoon. You remember, Doctor. It was a good day. We made sure the will of the eternal consciousness was done.'

'A thermosystron bomb,' breathed the Doctor. 'I thought I made sure they were all destroyed.'

Kortez nodded. 'They were. Except for this.'

'You didn't report it to the General?'

'Destiny. I knew that somehow, some day, this device would have a greater part to play in the web of karmic fate. Today is that day. We must stop the enemy. It's the will of the one true mind of all things.'

Sam coughed nervously. 'Er, Doctor...?'

The Doctor swept up the bomb, then slipped it into his pocket. 'Thank you, Colonel. Now, if you'll excuse me?'

He darted up the steps. Sam watched the Colonel turn away before she followed. The man looked content. Satisfied. Like he thought he'd done his duty, and done it well.

Sam drew level with the Doctor halfway up the first flight of stairs. 'He's mad, isn't he?' she asked.

'He's a little upset,' the Doctor admitted. 'Saskatoon was a very difficult affair.'

'You mean, he's mad.'

'Well, in a manner of speaking.'

'And that stuff about destiny?'

'His imagination's getting the better of him. There's no room for destiny in a universe this small.' The slightest of frowns appeared on the Doctor's face. 'With one or two notable exceptions.'

They reached a small landing on the first floor up. Various gloomy archways led to various gloomy corridors, and there was a stairway up to the next level off to one side. 'What about the bomb?' Sam queried. 'I thought you didn't like using weapons. Especially not *those* sorts of weapons.'

'I don't. But if somebody's going to be walking around with a piece of Selachian maximum impact implosive in his pocket, I'd rather it was me than the Colonel. Oh.'

The Doctor froze. Sam froze, too.

They were at the bottom of the next stairway by now. Standing at the top of the flight, on the second-floor landing, was the alien Sam had seen waddling past the guest room. It had turned to face them, and now it was covering the lower landing with one of its wobbly limbs. The arm ended in a thick tube, Sam saw, open at the end. It reminded her of a bazooka. Big, chunky, lethal-looking.

The Doctor grabbed the sleeve of her t-shirt. It tore as he tugged it, but the tug was enough to make her stumble back towards the top of the last stairway. They ducked through the archway, as the landing in front of them was filled with a dense white smoke. Sam squinted into the haze. No, it wasn't smoke. It was a cloud full of crystals. Tiny, razor-edged crystals.

The cloud began to settle. She heard the sound of heavy footsteps, climbing the stairs above them. Sam moved forward, to re-enter the landing.

The Doctor pulled her back again. Shaking his head, he reached into his jacket, and pulled out what seemed to be the first thing that came to hand. It was a fairy-cake, covered in fluff. The Doctor looked puzzled, clearly having no idea where the item had come from.

He lobbed the cake onto the landing. As it flipped through the air, small holes opened up in its surface, as if hundreds of tiny invisible mouths were trying to get at the currants. By the time it hit the ground, the cake was nothing more than a collection of crumbs.

'Each of the crystals is a miniature corrosive device,' the Doctor mumbled. 'A cloud of them is enough to gnaw an organic life-form to the bone in seconds. They disperse the waste material as dust. The corrosive's more powerful than I expected, though. Even after the cloud settles, the atmosphere's still deadly. Now we know what happened to the ship's pilot.' He nodded towards the walls of the landing. The stone there was covered in a thin sheen of crystal. Parts of the wall were starting to drip like melted wax.

'So, how do we get past?'

'We don't. The stairway's going to be a deathtrap for a good while yet.' The Doctor looked up at

the ceiling. Sam got the impression he was trying to stare through the stone and watch what was happening on the roof. 'Let's hope the Shift decides to leave now. If it really is determined to complete its mission, things could get very nasty indeed.'

Sam, of course, didn't understand a word of this.

E-Kobalt-Prime extended its pincer attachment, then eased it into the control growth, which by now had firmly taken root inside the black ship's systems. At the Kroton's touch, the hatchway sealed itself shut, and the floor began to ripple, very gently, as the vessel's engines were brought on-line.

E-Kobalt could not, in all honesty, have been called unhappy. The auction hadn't gone well, but that hardly seemed important now. It no longer saw any reason to communicate with the other bidders. It had always believed carbon-based life to be unreliable, and events in the ziggurat had proved that all its worst ideas about alien animals had been correct.

Diplomacy had failed, but the City's defences were down. E-Kobalt had discovered this on the stairs, when it had tested its weapons attachment and filled the air with corrosive. The humanoids wouldn't be able to pursue it now. They would be destroyed, cleanly and efficiently, and the Relic would become the property of the Kroton Absolute.

That one single idea, that simple devotion to the most basic of military instincts, was now the linchpin of E-Kobalt's entire psyche. It issued another order to the control growth. The engines throbbed, and the black ship began to lift itself off the roof of the ziggurat.

Meanwhile, in the darkest depths of the Kroton's subconscious, the Shift allowed itself the conceptual equivalent of a satisfied nod.

THE SHIFT'S STORY

Darkness, no easily discernible time

They were taking him apart. The thought should have scared him more than it did, but then, it wasn't the worst thing that had happened to him today. He could still remember how it felt to lie under a Day-Glo yellow sun, with snow blowing into the cracks in his body. He could even remember knowing he was about to die. A gentle, creeping feeling. Not a single moment of horror, not the way he would have imagined it.

They were taking him apart. Soon, there wouldn't be anything left of him, not anything you could touch. Almost idly, he noticed that he didn't have a brain left. He didn't know how he could think without a brain, but he seemed to be getting by.

Before, he'd been a person, one insignificant little element of the Gabrielidean Nth Platoon. Now, he was even less than that. Just the idea of a person. A set of memories with no one to remember them. A thought without a head.

He concentrated on the memories. He let himself remember his final hour of life in the material universe.

Darkness.

He was cold. He would have been in pain, if all his senses had been working, but he was lying with his back against the ice, and the temperature had short-circuited most of the nerves across his torso. The nerves of his human suit, anyway. His real body sloshed around inside the skin, doing its best to keep itself warm. His brain was still hooked into the suit's nervous system, so he was feeling the cold the way a human would have felt it. Looking at the world through human eyes.

He couldn't see much, though. Whiteness from here to the edge of the world. A landscape made from six-hundred kinds of snow, shining in the sunlight, but never getting round to thawing. There was no night, he'd been told, not here. Something to do with some aurora or other. The sky was lit by stripes of orange and turquoise, brilliant psychedelic arcs that reached from horizon to horizon. The first scouting mission that had been sent here had gone mad. When the Nth Platoon had been assigned to the planet, the troops had wired neural suppressors into the eyes of their human suits, to blot out the psychological side-effects of the light.

He tried moving his head. His neck didn't seem to want to turn, but he managed to force it.

That was when he saw the rest of his body, sprawled out in front of him, the snow already starting to bury his limbs. He wanted to close his eyes, but his eyelids didn't respond to the command. The torso of the human suit had split open, revealing the churning mass of his true body inside. One entire arm had come loose, and his biomass was spilling out of the sleeve in slicks of brilliant pink. One of the suit's legs had been torn off, as well, but he couldn't see whether he was leaking out of the wound there.

Every part of the suit had been armoured. Every flake of skin had been sprayed with bullet-proof plasticene. It hadn't made one bit of difference. The sergeant had sent him out on a recon sweep, and the combat satellite had located him while he'd been away from the rest of the platoon. It had fired on him, once, from somewhere in the upper atmosphere, then it had left him alone. Perhaps it had thought he wasn't likely to be much of a threat, with his spinal column shattered, his skin broken open, and the body inside slowly freezing.

A cluster of silhouettes appeared on the horizon in front of him, tiny smears of black against the blazing white background. He guessed, he hoped, it was the rest of the Nth Platoon, the sergeant and all her little boot-lickers. He thought of calling out to them, but he guessed there wasn't much point.

Then everything started to fade to black. His eyelids were closing, he realised. The software controlling his face had finally figured out that his eyes needed rest, occasionally.

He wondered if he'd be able to wake up again.

Darkness.

'...have to leave him here. OK. Get your palm-scans tuned, this is going to be the hard part.'

He was conscious again, but he didn't have the strength to open his eyes. Besides, he knew what he'd see. The sergeant, in her head-and-shoulders-above-the-rest human suit, coated in spray-on armour from top to toe. The troops had found him, and it sounded like they weren't thinking of taking him with them.

Military procedure. Of course. There hadn't been space for a doctor inside the transit capsule, so the wounded could go and die on their own time, as far as the sergeant was concerned. He could hear the sounds of boots, scrunching against the ice. The other members of the platoon, obviously, getting tooled up for the big assault. They'd be checking their palm-scans, giving the terrain the once-over. They'd be looking nervous, too. Sweating deep red inside their suits.

'Right,' said the sergeant. 'It's like we thought. No signs of ground-based forces. We can assume the satellites are still in effect, so don't drop your cloaks. Looks like the enemy can bypass them anyway, but you've got to live in hope.'

There was a grumble of discontent from the troops. Not loud enough to be considered mutinous, naturally.

'And you can stop that, as well,' the sergeant growled. 'OK. The Time Lords say the enemy installation's over on the north side of the big ridge, and I'm not going to argue with them. It's shielded, so we'll need to find it for ourselves, the palm-scans aren't going to do us a lot of good. Any questions?'

Nobody said anything.

'Great. So let's move. And stop staring at him like that. He's not going anywhere.'

More grumbling. Then more scrunching. The sound of marching feet.

They were walking away from him. Well, obviously they were walking away from him, it wasn't as if he were an indispensable part of the mission or anything. He was light infantry. Cannon fodder. Only here because he knew how to fire a staser without shaking his own arm off. One of a million stupid recruits who'd been primed to shoot at anything they were told to shoot at. The Gabrielidean military didn't like people who asked questions, and neither did the Time Lords.

No, he thought. No, not here. I know where I want to die, and it's not here, on some freezing alien rock nobody's even heard of. I don't want to leak out into the ground. I don't want to be a biomass popsicle. I want to die where it's warm. I want to die in the pool where I was born. I want to die like a Gabrielidean.

He opened his mouth to tell the Nth Platoon this, but all that came out from between his artificial lips was a long, high-pitched wail. If any of his comrades noticed it, they must have thought it was the wind, because he didn't hear any of them turn around. The scrunching faded away, became part of the planet's background noise.

He didn't have the energy to scream any more. He let his vocal cords go slack, and felt himself drifting off to sleep again.

Darkness.

He awoke to the sound of whispering. Not the normal sort of whispering, not the sort you could hear through the ears of a human suit. It sounded like it was trapped under the skin of the world, below the surface of everything you could see or feel. Words were trying to come up for air, but it felt like there was a layer of ice between him and them, hard as the ice under his back.

He was being discussed. He knew when people were talking about him, and they were talking about him now. A few of the sentences broke the surface, bobbed around on the edges of his hearing.

'...an ideal subject?' somebody asked.

'...is getting close now,' somebody else said.

'...makes no difference... until the Doctor... perfect opportunity...'

But it was too much of an effort, trying to understand them. His body was still oozing out of the suit, staining the snow pink underneath him. Soon, there'd be nothing left of him. He didn't have the energy to think about imaginary voices.

He let his senses sink back into the ice.

Darkness.

When he regained consciousness, he wasn't alone.

He couldn't see his visitor. His head was locked in position, the joints frozen in his neck. But there was someone pacing up and down behind him, shoes crunching against the snow. There was a tap-tap-tapping, the sound of a stick probing the ground, testing to see how solid it was.

Suddenly, the crunching stopped.

'Are you awake?' a voice asked.

He concentrated on the voice, but he didn't recognise it. It sounded like it came out of a humanoid mouth – real humanoid, so it wasn't another Gabrielidean in a suit – and it was tinged with an accent he couldn't quite place. There was no native life on this planet, he'd been told, and the enemy weren't supposed to have any troops here, only automatic defences. Did the voice belong to an alien, then? An outsider?

It took him a full minute to get the suit's vocal cords working. 'I'm awake,' he croaked.

The alien made a few more crunching sounds behind him. Crouching down, presumably. 'I wasn't expecting to find anybody here. The rest of your platoon's gone. I should think they're going to get help.'

He almost found that funny. Evidently, the alien was trying to reassure him, though he had no idea why.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I'm an observer. A spectator. An interested party. Trust me, I'm not important.'

'You're a Time Lord?'

'Ah. Well, I'm not working for the High Council, if that's what you mean.'

'And you're not one of the enemy?'

'That depends where you're standing,' said the alien. 'Enough about me. What about you?'

Hell of a question. 'I think I'm dying,' he said.

'Hmm. You're badly wounded, certainly. Your suit's never going to dance again. But I don't think the damage to your inner body is irreparable.'

'You're a doctor?'

A pause. 'You should try to relax. Stay still. Stay calm. Wait for help.'

'There isn't going to be any help,' he said. And he could tell the vocal cords were starting to malfunction, because the words sounded flat, empty, and metallic.

The alien tutted. 'There's always help, somewhere in the universe. There's an old story about a tailor, a fieldmouse, and a hatpin...'

So the alien started telling him the story. He tried to follow it, he did his best not to think about what was happening to him, but everything was so hard to focus on, tailors and fieldmice and hatpins, and once upon a time there was the cold, and it was so cold it almost hurt, even though there were no working nerves left in his body, and it was so hard to see, so hard to stay awake...

Darkness.

'...hear me?' said the alien.

Somehow, he managed to open his eyes. There were shapes in front of him, blobs of pink and black, but his retinæ were starting to mist over, so he couldn't tell which parts of his body he was looking at. There was a man-sized outline standing over him, and he took it to be the alien, although the figure was too blurry to make out any details.

'Blacked out,' he said.

'Yes. I thought so.' The alien blur shifted a little. 'Try to stay conscious. I'm sorry I can't do more for you myself. I don't really know much about Gabrielidean biology. One of those things I never got around to reading up on. Liquid life-forms aren't really my forte.'

He tried moving one of his limbs, to see if he still could. He didn't feel anything, though, so he had no way of telling if he'd succeeded. 'Injector,' he told the alien. 'Need a medical injector.'

'Yes. That's a thought.' The alien blur wobbled. Patting the pockets of a jacket, maybe. 'Ah. I thought perhaps I could improvise one out of a human hypospray kit, but I don't seem to have a human hypospray kit on me. I'm sure I owned one, at some stage. I wonder where I put it? Bearing in mind that this is an emergency, it'll probably be in the last place I look. Isn't it always the way? I did have a winklegruber neural parameter predictor, once. Always came in handy in

situations like this.'

'A what?' he said. There was an ugly grinding noise from his throat when he spoke.

'A winklegrubber neural parameter predictor,' the alien elaborated. 'Very useful piece of technology. You tell it what you're looking for, and it works out the last place you'd think of searching. All you have to do then is look where the predictor tells you to look, and you're bound to find whatever it is you're after.'

Well, the alien was doing a good job of keeping him distracted, anyway. 'Use it now,' he hissed. 'The predictor. You could use it now.'

'Oh, I don't have it any more. I lost it. I would search for it, of course, but...'

'...it's going to be in the last place you look,' he said, and he was frankly amazed he could still manage whole sentences like that.

'Precisely.'

He tried to nod. As a result, the head of his human suit rolled right off its shoulders and landed face-down in the snow.

'Are you all right?' asked the alien.

'Yes. Please. Tell me something.'

'Go on.'

'Help isn't really coming, is it?'

There was a period of silence, during which he almost blacked out again. 'I don't know,' the alien said, eventually. 'The others in your platoon were killed by the satellites. I'm sorry. I should think your people will be sending an emergency capsule soon. They'll want to find out if there are any survivors.'

He tried to look up, but he couldn't. He was seeing through the eyes of a severed head, staring down at the snow underneath him. There was nothing but white. A universe of white. He felt his senses switching themselves off, in a desperate attempt to shut out the blankness.

'Thank you,' he said.

'You're welcome,' the alien told him, softly.

Darkness.

When he next regained consciousness, he was alone, but at least there were colours in front of his face again. Somehow, his human head had been turned on its side. He wondered if the alien had done it. To let him have one last look at the world around him.

Simia KK98. He didn't even know why he was here. Until yesterday, he'd never been posted anywhere further afield than Terra Neutra. All of a sudden, the government was mobilising the warships, making plans for full-scale planetary assaults. Something to do with some deal they'd made. The Time Lords were asking the Gabrielideans to send units all over the galaxy, taking out an installation here, a weapons dump there. The Nth Platoon had been dispatched to KK98 because, apparently, their enemies felt the planet to be of strategic importance, and already had a small automated outpost there. If the platoon had survived the mission, it would have been sent straight to Dronid, in time for the big offensive. Dronid. Or "War Zone One", as they were calling it now.

The snow started blowing up again. He couldn't feel it on his skin, but he could see the flakes sticking to his eyeballs. He couldn't even close the lids. Perhaps he'd been better off lying face-down, after all.

There was nothing more for him to see. He decided to detach his brain from the suit. Human senses weren't going to do him much good now.

He flexed a nerve, tugged himself free of the false skin. The head shut itself down.

Darkness.

Darkness. This wasn't a memory any more. He was here, in the depths of the darkness, being taken apart, thought by thought. There were others here, he could see them, even though he no longer had any eyes. They were the ones he'd heard whispering. The ones who'd rescued him from Simia KK98. They were gathered around what was left of his true body, gazing down at him with pale, hard faces. They were all dressed in robes, flowing robes with high collars...

Time Lords? The Time Lords wore costumes like these, he'd heard. Had his allies rescued him?

Was it really that simple?

'...process seems to be working,' one of the robed figures was saying. 'It's the same kind of procedure we're using to make the anarchitecteds, but applied to a living subject. Not difficult, once you know how to handle the Celestis' technology.'

'Won't he turn against us when he finds out who we are?' another asked.

'It. Not he. It's purely conceptual. Gender doesn't mean anything to it, now.'

'But will it turn against us?'

No. No. Not Time Lords. Those weren't the robes of the High Council. They were parodies of Gallifreyan costumes, worn by beings that had nothing but contempt for Time Lord society. Which could only mean...

'Not a concern,' the first creature said. 'It was a professional soldier, in its former life. Practically a mercenary. I'm sure we can convert it to our cause. I told you it was the ideal subject, didn't I? We could have extracted it from the timeline sooner, but I wanted to wait until it had met the Doctor. To let it get the biodata scent, so to speak. We'll let it keep that particular memory.'

It? Was he an it, now, like the creature had said? It tried to speak, although it didn't have a mouth. It only had its thoughts, but its thoughts were enough. It reached out for its captors, and felt raw ideas shift inside their heads, making way for its message.

'WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?' it demanded.

The beings seemed shocked. It could feel their thoughts brushing against it, concepts rubbing and jostling as it settled in their perceptions.

'Not yet,' the first of the figures said. 'Not yet. You're not ready for your instructions. You still have a few traces of your old identity left. We have to remove them.'

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN?'

But the beings didn't say another word. It felt the last remaining fragments of its past vanishing from its non-existent brain, the memories of its former life as a Gabrielidean plucked out and discarded with surgical precision. Soon, there would be nothing. No flesh, no mind, no identity.

Darkness.

12

SHIFTWORK

There was a humming in the air. To most ears, it would have sounded something like an engine, but Colonel Joseph Kortez preferred to liken it to the constant and unchanging vibration of the one true will of the universe. He considered humming along with it, but decided this probably wasn't the time.

He stepped through the archway, out of the ziggurat and into the pavement-coloured daylight of the ReVit Zone. According to the Colonel's watch, it was early evening in the East Indies, but the sun still seemed to be under the impression it was lunchtime. The other buildings around the City enclosure didn't cast shadows, he noticed. Presumably, time had a special relationship with the Unthinkable City. The world never turned around here, the sun never did anything as impolite as making shade. He wondered if it had been the same in Brigadoon.

Before he even had time to meditate on that, the ground was wrenched open in front of him. All of a sudden, everything smelled of melted plastic.

Kortez turned. He was far enough away from the ziggurat to be able to see the roof, plus the ugly black shape hovering over it. The humming, Kortez realised, was the ship's drive mechanism. A tiny point of green light opened up on the underside of the vessel, then widened. Much like the third annihilating eye of Shiva, in the Colonel's view.

Another explosion. Kortez raised his arms to his face, to protect his eyes from the blast. Only then did he notice that his hands were burning.

The black ship had opened fire, scorching the ground from its vantage point above the ziggurat. Kortez had been on the edge of the blast. He would have called himself lucky, if he hadn't known it was nothing to do with luck and everything to do with the natural balance of karmic law. The fire had seared his hands, but there hadn't been any pain. The swords used by the warrior-philosophers of ancient Japan had been sharp enough to amputate a man's leg without him feeling a thing, Kortez had heard. The ship's weapons were just as efficient, just as painless. The skin on his hands was charred, the flesh underneath sizzling, the nerves entirely burned out. The fire seemed to be spreading, working its way up his veins like a spark on a fusewire.

Overhead, the ship opened up its annihilating eye again. What passes must pass, Kortez told himself, but now wasn't the time of his passing. There was no way he could make it to the City gates without being taken out by hostile fire – his karma wasn't *that* good – so the only way was back, into the shelter of the ziggurat. He made a run for it. The fire burst across the ground where he'd been standing, then spread, so he could feel the heat licking at his back.

He was beginning to feel pain, at last. A slow, uneasy throbbing in his arms. But pain, he reminded himself, was not an issue. In the grand karmic scheme of things, he was a soldier, and a soldier understood nothing but his duty. He leapt towards the ziggurat entrance.

The Doctor practically bounced back into the hall, as did his little companion. Qixotl felt like giving both of them a good slap.

'It's no use,' the Doctor told the bidders. 'E-Kobalt's blocked off the stairway. The air's full of Kroton supercorrosive. Is there another way up?'

All eyes turned on Qixotl. That had been happening a lot recently, and Qixotl was getting fed up with it. 'Uh, no. Can't we clear this corrosive stuff away or anything?'

'Well, I could use an EHF variable phase signal to readjust its cellular structure.' The Doctor patted his pockets. 'Unfortunately, my sonic screwdriver seems to have deserted me again. It can be a bit temperamental, sometimes.'

'Again, I'm not sure I understand our situation,' said Cousin Justine. 'Are we to believe the Shift intends to attack us? If so, does the Kroton vessel have sufficient power to damage the ziggurat?'

Qixotl tried to skulk off into the shadows, before anyone started asking him how tough the

building was. Technically, the place was built out of block transfer calculations; local space-time had been remodelled using sheer mathematics, no actual physical materials had been used. In theory, mundane weapons weren't supposed to be able to do any damage to the City. In practice, Qixotl hadn't had time to check his maths, and he suspected his calculations might have been slightly off-centre. The way things stood, he doubted it'd take much force to make the City come apart at the seams. Really, he'd been counting on the defensive systems to stop that kind of thing happening.

Fortunately, nobody was paying him the slightest bit of attention. 'I'm not sure,' the Doctor mused. 'But even if the ziggurat's safe, there's a chance that –'

'The Shift won't let us out,' reported Colonel KorteZ.

The Colonel stood in the main archway of the conference hall, his hands stretched out in front of him, as if he wanted to keep a close eye on what they were doing. Qixotl winced when he saw the injuries.

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Colonel? Where have you been?'

'Outside. On a mission to recon the area surrounding the ziggurat, with special regard for traps, ambushes, or enemy emplacements. As ordered.'

'Ordered? Ordered by whom?'

Everybody looked at Qixotl, again. Qixotl shrank back even further. 'Look, I just said it might be a good idea to check out the rest of the City, right? I mean, y'know, you can't be too careful.'

The Doctor shot daggers at him. Not literally, of course, although Qixotl could easily imagine how he'd look with cybernetic bolt-firers grafted into his skull. 'You mean, you wanted to see if the Shift would shoot at anyone who left the building.'

'Don't look at me like that,' Qixotl mumbled.

The Doctor turned back to KorteZ. 'Apparently, the Shift wants us to stay right where we are. I'm sorry, are you all right?'

'Pain is not an issue,' the Colonel informed him.

'Oh. Good. Well, anyway, we'll have to find another exit. My TARDIS is somewhere out in the rainforest, I'm afraid.'

Homunculette snorted. 'Don't look at me. Marie's not going anywhere.'

'We weren't looking at you,' Cousin Justine pointed out.

Homunculette rounded on her. 'What about you, then? How did you get in here? One of the Faction's little TARDIS mock-ups, was it?'

Qixotl clicked his fingers. 'Yeah, right! Your, what d'you call it, your shrine. It can get us out of the City, yeah?'

By Justine's side, Little Brother Manjuele clenched his teeth. 'No way,' he growled. 'No way you comin' with us.'

The Doctor held up a placating hand. 'Needs must when the devil drives. Cousin?'

Justine dabbed her face with a black silk handkerchief. Her skin was still speckled with blood, after the four-way fight earlier on. 'Very well.'

'What about the Relic?' asked the Doctor's pet.

The Doctor looked pleased with her. He was probably training the girl, thought Qixotl. 'I hadn't forgotten, Sam. We can collect the Relic before we leave.'

'Who can collect it?' demanded Homunculette.

The Doctor sighed. 'We can all do it together, if you like.'

'Just as long as the Krotons don't take it,' Sam added. Qixotl got the impression she'd only said it to make herself feel like she was part of the conversation. The Doctor gave her an encouraging smile.

'Yes. Although, to be precise, there is only the one Kroton here –'

He froze in mid-sentence. The smile dropped off his face.

'Qixotl,' he said.

'Er, yeah?'

'Do you remember what E-Kobalt said, when he arrived?'

Qixotl blew through his lips. 'Don't ask me. I didn't understand most of it. Oh, yeah, I know. He said he'd intercepted that black spaceship, but he'd already sent for... oh, hell.'

'I knew we'd forgotten something,' the Doctor muttered.

And at that moment, with a sense of timing that could only have been called impeccable, there was an ominous rumbling from outside the ziggurat.

E-Kobalt ceased its reminiscing, and listened to what the control growth had to tell it.

Kilometres above the surface of the planet, the sky was unfolding, revealing things that had travelled here under the skin of space-time, unseen by the universe-at-large. The ships were made of crystal, grown on the looms of Quartzel-88, their shapes unmistakable. As they came into contact with the Earth's atmosphere, their engines caused wild fluctuations in the planet's psychic aurora, as superspatial drives often did. E-Kobalt thought of the effects the disturbances might have on the bipeds here, and found the notion amusing. As much as anything could be found amusing by a Kroton.

The ships – the dynatropes – descended. They moved fast, faster than the vessel E-Kobalt had arrived in. Soon, they were within visual range. E-Kobalt watched them through the sensory apparatus of the control growth.

There were ten of the dynatropes, arranged in an upside-down tetrahedron, with the spearhead craft at the bottom of the formation and the six long-range artillery craft at the top. They were pale and jagged, like enormous pulled teeth, and they spun as they fell, filling the air with a deep, discordant warbling, loud enough to shake the walls of the City below.

Ten ships. A Warspear. The dynatropes unfolded their probe limbs, sweeping the atmosphere, searching for information. E-Kobalt let a little more of his consciousness seep into the control growth, then warbled back to the Warspear on the standard communications frequency.

It was ready to make its report. And, as the commander of this unit, it knew the others would listen to any ideas it might have about how to deal with the alien bipeds.

'A Kroton Warspear,' the Doctor explained.

Sam bounded along by his side, inquisitive as ever. She'd all but forgotten what had happened the last time she'd gone down to the vault, the Doctor realised. One whiff of action, and she was her old self again. The perfect companion.

The perfect companion...

They were hurrying down the steps now, Qixotl, Kortez, Homunculette, and the two Paradox cultists in tow. Nobody trusted anybody else to take care of the Relic, so they were all heading for the lowest level together. Homunculette and Manjuele never took their eyes off each other, while Kortez spent most of the time staring at the broken skin on his hands and humming something that sounded slightly Tibetan. Of all the surviving bidders, only Trask was absent. The dead man had vanished at some point; nobody had spotted where or when, exactly, but the Doctor doubted it mattered. Even if he was faster than the average corpse, he was hardly likely to get to the vault before them and make off with the Relic.

The Doctor tutted to himself. Once they reached the Faction's shrine, they'd be safe from the Krotons, but he had no idea what would happen then. He imagined the bidders sharing out the Relic between themselves. An arm for the Celestis, a leg for Homunculette, a pancreas for the Faction...

'What's a Warspear?' Sam queried.

The Doctor stopped pontificating. 'I'm not sure. I've met the Krotons before, but only isolated units. I think it's safe to assume the reinforcements are going to be heavily armed, though.'

'What about Kathleen?' Sam asked.

'And what about Marie?' wheezed Homunculette.

The Doctor waved the questions aside. 'We'll pick them up as we go. But we're running out of time. Keep moving.'

The Relic is the important thing.

The Doctor nodded. 'Exactly. The Relic is the important thing.'

The Relic has a message.

'The Relic has a message,' the Doctor repeated.

'Sorry, what?' said Sam.

'I said, the Relic –'

The Doctor stopped. Stopped dead. Stopped dead? Stupid expression to think of, at a time like

this.

The Relic has a message, and it's very important.

The Doctor shook his fist in front of his face. 'Stop it,' he insisted.

'Stop what?' asked Sam.

'Not you.'

The Relic is...

'I said, stop it!' He closed his eyes, and started walking again, letting his feet find the steps on their own. He felt himself cross the landing on the first floor down, then move down the staircase towards the lowest level, brushing aside the remains of the retinal webs on the way.

Sam's voice drifted back into his consciousness. 'Doctor? You're picking up telepathic stuff again, aren't you?'

'Yes. Yes, I am.' The Doctor slipped, almost fell down the steps, but he recovered himself in the nick of time. Behind him, the bidders started muttering anxiously. 'Sam, please. Don't talk to me. It's hard keeping the voice out of my head. The closer I get to the casket...'

The closer you get to the casket, the closer you get to the future. I don't know why you're so afraid of your own body, Doctor. Think of it as a point of certainty in your life. A cornerstone. Everything else is so vague, these days. So changeable...

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

I think you do. You used to be so careful, as well. You always did your best to stop anything happening to the timeline. Remember when Adric drove that freighter full of antimatter into the Earth, and wiped out the dinosaurs for you? You felt like you'd lost so much, but let's be honest, you won that day. You did what you always do. You looked after history. You made sure the dinosaurs died out, dead on schedule.

'That's not true!'

I know, you've made a few small... let's not call them changes, let's call them improvisations. You've made sure a few people survived who wouldn't have survived. You've saved the odd human colony here, the occasional endangered species there. But wherever you went, you always made sure time ran its course. Until now, that is. Until this regeneration. You're not even thinking about the consequences anymore.

'Meaning?'

Just after you regenerated, remember? You went back and visited all your past lives. Changed your own timeline by doing it, too.

'It wasn't exactly my doing,' the Doctor protested.

You're blaming Rassilon?

'Well... if you like.'

Isn't that a bit like a Christian blaming God for all his mistakes? Let me try another approach, maybe you'll see what I'm getting at. Sam thinks of you as a function of the universe. Really, that's the way she sees you. Not a person, exactly, more a kind of built-in feature of existence.

'That's not true,' said the Doctor. Actually, he had no idea whether it was true or not.

Let me finish. Think back to that time when you went to see your previous selves. What was the first thing you did, once you'd finished playing with your timeline? What was the first thing that happened, once you were sure you'd got your identity back? I'll tell you, if you can't remember. You met up with Sam and took her on board the TARDIS. Almost as if some part of you knew what she represented, and had to complete the process.

'I don't understand. What does Sam represent?'

'Who, me?' said Sam.

'Shhh. I asked you a question.'

You know what Sam represents. If a tree falls in a forest and no one's there to hear it, does it make a sound? Stop me if I'm getting too abstract here, but if a Time Lord saves the world and nobody witnesses him doing it, does history care? She's your witness. The thing you need to make you whole. Your heart's desire. Maybe that's why she was created in the first place. You and she were made for each other, she said so herself. Smith and Jones. It's so obvious, it's almost painful.

'No!' The Doctor felt a hand on his arm, probably Sam's, but he shook it off. 'I'm not listening to you. You're the Shift. You're putting all these ideas in my head to distract me...'

If you believed that, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Well, all right. Perhaps I'm partly the Shift. There have been so many alien ideas bouncing around your head, I'm not surprised you're hearing voices. Your synapses are in a mess, believe me. Think of me as a kind of temporary psychosis.

'A psychosis? You mean, I'm talking to my own dementia?'

Don't worry. I'm sure it'll pass.

'THIS-IS-E-KO-BALT-PRIME-OF-THE-KRO-TON-FIFTH-LATT-ICE. WE-ARE-NOW-IN-CON-TROL-OF-THIS-CI-TY.'

The Doctor opened his eyes. He was standing at the entrance to the vault, with the casket glowing smugly to itself on the other side of the dead kidney-garden. Around him, the others were clutching their ears. The Kroton's voice had echoed through the walls of the ziggurat, the same way the toucan alarms had. The Doctor guessed the City had been built to conduct sound that way. E-Kobalt was probably using some kind of PA system outside the building.

'YOU-WILL-SUR-REND-ER-THE-REL-IC-TO-US,' E-Kobalt went on. 'IF-YOU-O-BEY-YOU-WILL-BE-ALL-OWED-TO-LEAVE-THE-CI-TY-UN-HARMED. IF-YOU-RE-SIST-YOU-WILL-BE-DIS-PERSED.'

The Doctor felt his ears start to bleed. The voice was actually making the walls tremble, but at least it had blotted out the other voice, and for that he was grateful. He looked up at the ceiling. 'Listen to me, E-Kobalt. I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, then listen. We can't let you have the Relic. We'll die before we surrender it. Do you understand?'

'Er, what did you say?' said Qixotl. He was crawling around on his knees, his hands still poised over his ears.

'I said, we'll die before we surrender the Relic.'

'Uh. I thought that's what you said.'

'Don't worry, it's only a figure of speech.'

'You think the Krotons know that?'

'KRO-TON-UN-ITS-HAVE-AL-READ-Y-BEEN-DIS-PATCHED,' intoned E-Kobalt. Thankfully, it said nothing else after that. The Doctor wondered if the Shift knew enough about the ziggurat to think of using the PA system as a sonic weapon, but he quickly put the thought out of his mind. Just in case the Shift found it there.

Homunculette pushed himself between the Doctor and the vault. 'That's got to be the Relic. How are we going to shift it?'

Qixotl got back on his feet. 'Not a problem. There are antigravs strapped to the bottom of the box, and there's a navicom in the lid. Sound-activated.'

'Really?' said the Doctor. He put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled.

'It only responds to me...' Qixotl began. But he didn't bother finishing the sentence. Slowly, very slowly, the casket lifted itself off the ground, and drifted across the vault towards them. The Doctor remembered the Hand of Omega, and all the happy hours he'd spent taking it for walks when he'd first made a home for himself on Earth.

The Relic floated right up to him, then lowered itself onto the ground. The other bidders took a step backwards.

'Good boy,' the Doctor said, patting the casket on the lid. He hoped nobody could tell how much he was squirming.

At the bottom of the artron by-product waste-shaft, the puddle was still remembering.

Specifically, it was remembering its first attempt at mating. Once the mating process had been completed, it had felt something detonate in its bigger-than-planets womb, a burst of life, a second micro-universe forming within the micro-universe of Marie's body. A second TARDIS. Near-infinity inside near-infinity.

The puddle remembered the sense of combined hatred, rage, and disappointment when the Time Lords had taken the infant TARDIS away, extracting it from the womb before it had even grown its first power cell. They'd put it into suspension, trapping it inside one of their little pan-dimensional boxes. It was only a child, they'd said. It needed proper supervision.

She'd never seen the infant again.

Another break in the memories.

Then Marie was in the ziggurat, her weapons systems bringing themselves on-line. She told

them to stop, but they refused to listen. She felt the shell of her body opening up. New impulses, new responses.

She knew who Trask was working for. She knew who the Shift was working for. In some part of her cognitive core, she even understood what the Shift was planning, and guessed what it would try to do if it failed.

The memory acid had been dispersed. Marie's past was lying in pools around the interior of her body, each part remembering something, no part remembering everything. The puddle congealed, becoming a semi-solid, then threw out feelers, tiny shoots of grey ooze that probed the bottom of the shaft. The memory acid had been designed to be adaptive, self-repairing, and self-reliant. The puddle knew it had to find the rest of Marie's identity. It knew it had to put her back together again.

One of the feelers attached itself to the side of the shaft, and dragged the rest of the puddle's mass after it. Slowly, very slowly, the puddle began to climb.

Homunculette's guest room looked like a military barracks. Cousin Justine experienced a brief twinge of satisfaction when she saw it. A few centuries ago, a Time Lord's guest room would have been a monument to opulence, all Ionic columns and gold trimmings. But here, the fittings were grey and functional, and the air on the other side of the doorway stank of male hormones instead of incense. This is what half a millennium of warfare can do to a race, Justine decided. And nobody deserved it more than the Time Lords.

From the corridor, she watched Homunculette bending over his TARDIS, staring into the machine's eyes as if she were a sick kitten. 'She's getting better,' Homunculette grumbled. 'I can see the memory patterns coming together in the iris monitors.'

'Let's move,' said Little Brother Manjuele.

Justine nodded her agreement. 'If you're quite ready, Mr Homunculette? We are under attack, after all.'

Homunculette turned to glare at her. 'I'm ready. Help me get her up.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I can't carry her alone, can I? Come on. Help me.'

'F'get it,' Manjuele said, with the faintest of grins.

Homunculette clenched his fists. 'Listen, you little primitive –'

'Look out!'

Justine spun around. The Doctor stood next to her, his companion at his side, the Relic hovering at his feet. Qixotl and the UNISYC Colonel were close at hand, and all of them were staring up the corridor. Justine followed their lead.

There was something at the end of the passage, standing at the point where the corridor turned a ninety-degree corner. At first, Justine thought the creature was E-Kobalt, but she soon realised it was larger, bulkier, than the Kroton commander had been. Its body was bloated, covered in shapeless bumps, the front of its torso plated with panels of silver-white armour. Instead of legs, it had a single gigantic tread. Its shoulders were huge, almost touching the opposing walls of the passage. Justine was reminded of one of the war machines described in the works of Mr Wells. Tanks, she'd heard them called.

Like E-Kobalt, the monster had two flexible limbs extending from its body. However, both of these arms ended in open tubes. The being's tiny head rotated on top of its gigantic body.

'What –' Justine began.

Before she could say anything more, something knocked her off her feet. In the moments that followed, she worked out that it had been the Doctor. He'd moved backwards down the corridor, away from the war machine, sweeping Justine along with him. When Justine regained her senses, she found herself leaning against the wall at the other end of the passage. The Doctor and his assistant were nearby, while Qixotl and Kortez were already hurtling off along a side-tunnel.

As Justine watched, the corridor in front of her was filled with what looked like a thick white mist. She saw Manjuele sprinting towards her, the wave-front of the gas at his back. The Little Brother looked terrified. It was the first time Justine had seen him like that, and it was amazing how pathetic he suddenly seemed.

There was a groaning from the other side of the vapour, the sound of the monster trundling

forward. Justine saw the casket vanish amidst the puffy white clouds. It had tried to follow the Doctor, but it hadn't been fast enough.

'Move!' the Doctor shouted.

So Justine moved. She made for the side-tunnel, the same way Qixotl and the Colonel had gone, the Doctor and the girl in front of her. The Cousin's skirt wrapped itself around her legs as she ran, so she had to hop some of the way to stop herself toppling over.

'What is it?' the girl asked, as she headed up the passage.

'Another Kroton,' the Doctor told her. 'Full battle dress, this time. It's the kind of body they wear when they want to make an impression. Not very energy-efficient, though.' He stopped, without warning. Justine very nearly ran into him. 'Which way to the shrine?' he asked her, urgently.

Justine pointed. 'But the Relic –'

'Too late. We're going to have to tackle the problem at the source.' He took his companion's hand, and dragged her away around the corner Cousin Justine had indicated.

Manjuele appeared at Justine's side. His eyes were bulging out of his head, and he looked like he was ready to start crying at any moment.

'S'no good,' he blabbered. 'No good. S'like home. S'just like home. Riot tanks. Oh God. Oh Jesus Christ.'

Cousin Justine slapped him. Once, on the cheek, as hard as she could.

'We have a duty to the Grandfather,' she said, sternly. 'Had you forgotten?'

Manjuele looked down at his shoes. A grimace settled on his face.

Justine surveyed the passage. The Doctor and his friend were long gone. Kortez and Qixotl had vanished, too. Behind them, the rumbling had stopped, and the gas wasn't following them around the corner.

'What d'we do?' Manjuele asked, feebly.

'The Spirits will guide us,' Justine replied. Amazingly, she managed to make it sound like she really believed it.

The Kroton's designation was I-Coda-Minor. It had been one of the four units manning the lead ship of the Warspear, and like its cell-mates, it had obeyed E-Kobalt-Prime's order to leave the dynatrobe without question. The next three ships in the Warspear formation had received the same order. Two units from each craft had disembarked, the dynatropes descending to ground level before opening up their sphincteral valves and allowing their occupants to roll out into the City.

I-Coda twisted its cranial unit, readjusting its senses until it could see through the clouds of crystal up ahead. The corrosive had no effect on Kroton tissue, naturally, but it was known to have spectacular effects on carbon forms. I-Coda was disappointed to note that there were no bodies in the passage.

There was something of interest, though. An unidentified object, suspended above the floor on miniature antigrav units. I-Coda's high-level senses detected biological matter in the object's interior. The Kroton rolled forward, and extended a probe. E-Kobalt had given orders to look out for an item like this. Something of great tactical importance, evidently.

I-Coda's probings were interrupted by a dull sniffing sound, from somewhere within low-level sensory range. It readjusted its perception parameters. Yes; there were several chambers set alongside the corridor, and something was moving around inside one of them. I-Coda turned – a slow process, in this body – and trundled through the nearest doorway.

The room hadn't been affected by the corrosive. On the far side of the area was what I-Coda took to be a biped rest-unit, and stretched out on it was a motionless humanoid female. I-Coda detected no life signs. By the side of the unit was a single humanoid male.

'I-den-ti-fy-your-self,' I-Coda ordered.

The humanoid looked up. A trace of liquid appeared in the corner of one of the biped's visual sensors, though I-Coda wasn't sure if this was due to damage or some form of lubrication.

'Why can't you leave us alone?' the alien asked.

I-Coda answered the question by wobbling one of its weapons attachments. 'I-den-ti-fy-your-self-or-you-will-be-dis-persed.'

The humanoid reached out for the female being. It – he, I-Coda remembered; humanoids had specific terminology for units of different genders – stroked the side of the woman's face.

'Animals,' said the man, quietly. And disappeared.

I-Coda recalibrated its senses, but it was too late. Whatever had happened to the humanoid, the Kroton's systems hadn't picked it up. It was almost as if the being had vanished inside the body of the female, though the laws of physics insisted this was impossible.

Then the female disappeared, too. There was a rhythmic wheezing, groaning sound, which made I-Coda's head spin in the most peculiar way, before the last traces of her body faded out of existence.

The Kroton filled the room with corrosive material, more out of frustration than for any practical reason. Then it backed out into the corridor, and made its report to E-Kobalt.

A square of grey light appeared at the end of the passageway. Mr Qixotl kept moving. He had no idea where the others were, and he didn't particularly care. For a while, he'd been following Kortez, but they'd run into another one of the Kroton tanks, and Qixotl had lost sight of the Colonel among the clouds of corrosive. The man was probably dead by now. A wet patch of bio-mass, lying in a corner somewhere. Bleugh.

But now the exit was only a few metres in front of him. Qixotl had headed for the main entrance of the ziggurat – all right, the *only* entrance of the ziggurat – simply because he hadn't been able to think of anywhere else to go. Even if he'd managed to reach the Faction's shrine, he had no idea how to pilot the thing, and he doubted Cousin Justine would survive long enough to meet him there. He could have relied on the Doctor, of course, but he still got the feeling the Doctor wanted to kill him. Hell, the front door was as good a way out as any. The Shift had no reason to want him dead. The Doctor, yes. Homunculette, yes. But old Qixotl? Qixotl was the middleman. Anyone could see he was harmless. Right?

Right?

Yeah. He'd make it out of the ziggurat in one piece. The Krotons wouldn't bother firing on him from the air, not if the Shift was giving them their orders. His own ship was parked just outside the City wall, he could be off this dirtball planet in ten minutes or so.

A large, hulking, angular shape blocked the light at the end of the tunnel. Qixotl juddered to a halt, and raised his hands.

'OK, OK, so I'm trying to bail out,' he said. 'Not much of a problem for you guys, yeah? I mean, you let me get through, we'll forget this ever happened.'

The Kroton rumbled forward. Qixotl saw a second, identical shape moving into position behind it. Oh, good grief. How many of the things were there around here?

He took a step back. 'All right, I get the idea. You want me to give myself up, maybe help you out. Fine, whatever you say. You want to know where the Relic is? I can show you. No problem.'

'I-den-ti-fy-your-self,' gurgled the first Kroton.

'What? Oh, right.' Qixotl lowered his hands, and straightened his tie. 'Qixotl. Mr Qixotl. Your boss knows me.'

'Qi-xo-tl.' The Kroton's head swung a little to the left, then a little to the right. Qixotl guessed it was getting in touch with E-Kobalt, checking his ID. 'Qi-xo-tl. Mis-ter. You-have-been-i-den-ti-fied.'

'Good. Right. Lovely.'

'You-are-un-im-por-tant.'

'Er, sorry?' said Mr Qixotl.

The Kroton opened fire.

The burst was short, a puff of concentrated crystal that spurted from one of the Kroton's arms and licked against Qixotl's chest. There was no pain.

Qixotl gawped at the Kroton. 'What did you do that for?' he tried to say.

He tried. But he couldn't. He couldn't even breathe. He felt like someone had surgically extracted most of his throat. Then he looked down.

His chest wasn't there. There was a hole, almost a perfect circle, reaching from nipple to nipple. The front of his suit had been chewed away, as had his skin, as had the flesh underneath, as had most of his ribcage. There was no blood, though. The hole was rimmed with silver-tinted

frost, and inside his chest the organs looked like they'd been freeze-dried.

Many thoughts went through Qixotl's head in the next few nanoseconds. However, whichever way he looked at it, he kept coming back to the fact that no humanoid life-form could possibly survive with a wound like that.

The Krotons advanced. Qixotl fell to his knees, and clawed at his chest, desperately trying to knead the flesh back together with his fingers. In all honesty, though, it was never really a great survival plan. He was dying. That much was fairly obvious.

So he dropped to the ground, and let his body get on with it.

13

A-LES-SON-IN-AN-A-TO-MY

...physiologically, at least, the Krotons are among the least understood beings in Mutters' Spiral. Our galaxy is well-stocked with carbon-based life, and even silicon-based species, though rare, have been thoroughly researched, catalogued, and dissected over the years. Krotons, however, are something else.

The Kroton Absolute evolved from a form of quasi-organic tellurium-based crystal, native to a world commonly known as Krosi-Apsai-Core, though the empire which gave it that name has long since fallen. Originally, the crystal was predatory in nature, a gestalt life-form capable of creating "slaved" sub-beings out of its own biological mass. Though these individual units were not in any way sentient, they were adaptive enough to be able to nullify, or even to mimic, the innate offensive/defensive abilities of the species they preyed on.

However, when alien elements were introduced to Krosi-Apsai, the ecosystem went to pieces. The world was occupied by a militant capitalist humanoid culture [see p.349], which arrived in search of fresh territory, mineral wealth, and all the other things humanoids usually look for when they turn up on a new planet. The invaders soon set their servo-robots to work on Krosi-Apsai... a territorial challenge the crystal gestalt couldn't possibly ignore.

Until this point, the crystal had been unable to develop sentient consciousness, its structure being much too crude to mimic any complex organic neural system it might have come across. But the brains of the servo-robots were far more basic, far easier for the gestalt to copy. The result? Millions, perhaps billions, of semi-sentient crystalline entities, all heavily armed, all beginning to think like the imperialist worker-units they'd modelled themselves on. The humanoid invaders quickly withdrew, leaving behind a planet full of "Krotons" who suddenly had no idea what to do with themselves.

Over the centuries, the Krotons have developed rudimentary emotional capacity, and have even become capable of creativity, yet something of their heritage remains. Even today, each individual unit is "slaved" to the Kroton Absolute. Every Kroton is psychologically linked to every other Kroton, or at least, to every other Kroton within thinking distance. Some researchers have mistaken this link for telepathy, but in fact the connection is far more subtle.

The crystalline neural networks of the Krotons vibrate as new thoughts cross their minds, and if several Krotons are all thinking about the same thing, their brains vibrate on identical frequencies. Individual units can feel each other's mental fluctuations kilometres away, in much the same way that animals can feel earthquakes hours before any humanoid notices the ground begin to shake...

– Professor Gustous Thripsted, *Genetic Politics*
Beyond the Third Zone, Appendix XXIV.

Across the Unthinkable City, and in the craft that hovered above it, forty-one tellurium-based brains trembled in sympathy. On E-Kobalt's command, the dynatropes still in the air arranged themselves into a new formation. E-Kobalt knew, even from its position on board the black ship, that one of its underlings had located the Relic. And the pilots of the Warspear knew, from the control centres of their own vessels, what E-Kobalt wanted them to do next.

Each Kroton had the same idea in its head. The old military instinct, the same aggressive urge the Kroton Absolute had learned from the servo-robots on Krosi-Apsai-Core all those years ago. The situation was, in the mind of the commander, quite simple. Once the Relic had been removed from the building, the City would be destroyed, and all the unreliable carbon-based units inside it would be destroyed, as well. It wasn't a plan, it was a *fact*.

'This one,' said Sam, skidding to a halt halfway down the passage.

The Doctor peered through the doorway. Sam watched his face as he got his first eyeful of the

shrine. He didn't look surprised, but he did look vaguely revolted.

'Definitely TARDIS technology,' he said. He glanced back at the corridor behind him. 'What happened to Cousin Justine?'

Sam swore to herself, very very quietly. In a world of his own again, she thought. 'We lost her ages ago. Didn't you notice? Listen, we can't leave yet. We've got to get Kathleen. And the Relic.'

'We're not leaving. I think I've got an idea.'

'You *think* you've got an idea?'

'I think so. But I could be imagining it. There are a lot of background thoughts around, it's getting hard to concentrate.' The Doctor tilted his head a little. 'Do you hear that?'

Sam listened. There'd been all kinds of noises around the place while they'd been making their way here. Collapsing masonry, scurrying feet, spinning heads, the works. Now all she could make out was a steady rumbling sound, quite close, maybe around the next corner.

'It's one of the Krotons,' she said. 'That's the noise their treads make.'

'Perfect,' said the Doctor. Then he hurried off down the corridor, towards the source of the noise.

Sam was so startled, she didn't even feel like kicking him. She moved after him, but she stopped when she saw him reach the end of the passage. He'd come to a halt, facing the corridor around the corner, waving his arms. Oh no, thought Sam. Please, don't let him be waving at one of the Krotons. I mean, please.

'I-den-ti-fy-your-self,' burred a voice from around the corner. Sam winced.

'I am the Doctor,' the Doctor declared. He made it sound like an important announcement, like he was reading out the nominations for an academy award. 'I think your commander wants to speak to me. Perhaps you'd better tell him... tell *it*... where I am.'

There was a pause. Sam guessed the thing would be swivelling its head at him in a menacing fashion. 'You-are-a-known-en-em-y-of-the-Kro-ton-Ab-so-lute. The-First-Lat-tice-has-gi-ven-orders-that-your-bo-dy-is-to-be-re-co-vered-at-all-costs.'

The Doctor spread his arms wide. 'Well, here it is. That is, if you believe I really am the Doctor.'

'Ex-plain.'

The Doctor gave Sam a quick sideways glance. 'Just a passing thought. I could be anybody, for all you know. Some poor deluded passer-by, desperate for attention.'

Then something dramatic happened. A crystal spike, presumably part of the Kroton, lashed out at the Doctor. Sam jumped. The spike had shot down the passage like a bullet from a gun, but the Doctor had side-stepped it almost without seeming to notice. It had flown right past him, and embedded itself in the wall.

It was a tendril, Sam saw. Flexible, but sharpened to a point. The tendril had splintered when it had hit the wall, leaving small flecks of crystal littering the floor around the Doctor, and now the extension was twitching, trying to pull itself free of the stone. There was a low groaning noise, which Sam interpreted as a Kroton wail of anguish.

The Doctor reached down, swept up the largest available piece of shattered crystal, and hot-footed it back down the passage towards her.

'What...?' Sam said, knowing full well she'd never get the chance to finish the sentence.

'Biomass intake tube,' the Doctor rattled. 'It was trying to take a sample from me. Come on. Into the shrine.'

'You-will-not-move!' gargled the Kroton, around the corner.

'Why...?' Sam began.

He waved the shard of broken crystal in front of her face. 'Kroton biomass. We're holding our own ritual, and everybody's invited. I said, into the shrine. Quickly!'

Mr Qixotl wasn't dead. This surprised him as much as it would have surprised anyone.

It's not as if I planned for this or anything, he said to himself, as he lay on the floor with his guts hanging out. It's not as if I had some secret surprise force-field generator hidden under my vest, just in case. I'm lying here with a hole in my chest you could use as a punchbowl, and my legs all squashed where the Krotons rolled over them, and I haven't a clue why I'm still breathing.

Then he noticed that, as it happened, he wasn't breathing.

Damn.

Obviously, he was going through one of those strange time-slowness experiences people had when they were on the brink of snuffing it. Qixotl lay back, closed his eyes, and let himself go with it. There was no point agonising. The easiest thing to do was get some rest and wait for death.

But death only sent a representative.

'Qixotl,' said Trask. Mr Qixotl stared up at the walking corpse, and even now, even in his dying moments, he felt himself squirm. A nasty thought suddenly struck him.

'Oh no,' he said. 'I'm one of you, aren't I? I'm one of the living dead.'

Trask tried to shake his head, but the muscles must have been too stiff, because he gave up after a second or two. 'No. Qixotl. Not dead. Mortal stasis.'

'Sorry?'

'Mortal stasis. My employers. The Celestis. They can hold off your moment of death. For a while. Not long. Long enough for us to talk. To finish the deal.'

Then Qixotl remembered. The deal, the one Trask had offered him back in the guest room. At the time, the offer had sounded like a bad head-trip, but all of a sudden it seem to make perfect sense. 'You mean... now? You can actually...?'

'Yes.'

Qixotl tried to laugh, but his diaphragm didn't feel up to the task, what with the gaping wound in his torso and all. 'OK, Mr Trask. You've got my attention. Let's talk. Just make sure I don't snuff it halfway through a sentence, yeah?'

The Doctor tried to forget everything that wasn't important. The horrible decor of the shrine, the nasty itching sensation in his temples which he assumed was an allergic reaction to Paradox technology, the sound of the Kroton slowly rumbling down the passage outside... well, all right, the Kroton slowly rumbling down the passage outside was pushing the boundaries of "not important", but he had to concentrate.

There'd been a biosampler lying on the floor next to the control dais. It was a disgusting piece of apparatus, the same kind of voodoo science he'd seen on Dronid, but he'd been glad to see it there all the same. It meant he wouldn't have to use a penknife. The thought had been bothering him ever since he'd come up with the plan.

'Doctor? You're not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you?'

The Doctor slipped the biosampler over his fingers, and felt the metal rings close around his knuckles. 'If I know you well enough to think I know what you'll be thinking I'm thinking about, Sam, then... actually, I don't know. You're distracting me. Stop it.'

'Sorry.'

The Doctor took one last look around the shrine. The technology was no more complex than that of the TARDIS, but the operating system was different. He had to perform the ritual as if it were a holy duty. It was the only way of getting the shrine to understand him.

He dropped the shard of Kroton crystal onto the dais. There was a pause, and for a moment he thought the plan wasn't even going to get past stage one, but then the shrine started humming in his ear. It wasn't used to crystalline biomass, the Doctor concluded.

'I'd like to say a few words on this solemn occasion,' he intoned. 'Rabbits rabbits rabbits. Let sleeping dogs lie. There's many a slip 'twixt a cup and a lap. Boiled beef and carrots.'

'What?' said Sam.

The Doctor shushed her. If it sounded like a ritual, he reasoned, it'd probably be enough for the shrine. He pulled back the sleeve of his jacket, and pressed the spines of the biomsampler against the skin. Sam looked suitably appalled.

Was this the right thing to do? Yes, it might be the only way to stop the Krotons destroying the Unthinkable City, but could he, in all conscience, feed his own biodata to the shrine? After all, wasn't the whole point of the exercise to stop his biodata falling into the wrong hands?

No no no. There was no choice. He was trying to find an excuse not to go through with the rite, that was all.

He drove the spines into the flesh of his forearm. There was a hissing, popping sound, as his biodata was encoded into the buffer fluid inside the collection valves. The biosampler would only

be making a surface scan, the Doctor knew, but it'd be enough to complete the rite. And hopefully, not enough to be useful to the Faction, after all this was over.

The skulls hummed a little louder, anxious to be fed. Their moaning melded with the rumbling outside, as the Kroton rolled along the corridor towards the shrine. The Doctor held out the hand with the biosampler attached, and flexed the muscles in his fingers. The fluid plopped onto the dais.

The Spirits came.

The Doctor felt the air freezing up in his lungs. He hadn't expected it to happen this quickly. Maybe it was him. Maybe the Spirits knew he was a Time Lord, and knew he had no place here. They were circling him, surrounding him, their invisible bodies spilling from the dead mouths of the skulls, the babble of all Space and Time dripping from their tongues. He turned his head, but his muscles were slow to respond. When he finally managed to focus on Sam, she was frozen, her mouth locked open, her eyes caught in mid-blink.

Time was slowing, just for him. The Spirits were squeezing themselves into the cracks between one moment and the next, building themselves a tiny continuum there, a split-second universe that only he and they could inhabit. This was absurd, the Doctor reminded himself, of course it was absurd. There were no Spirits, everybody knew that. There were just the forces of Space and Time, uncaring and impersonal; only Faction Paradox would be mad enough to turn them into gods. But here, in the shrine the Faction had built, it was impossible to think of them any other way. Yes, legend claimed there had been a Grandfather Paradox, once, but if so, then why was there no record of his existence in the High Council's files? It was all rumour, rumour and myth, it wasn't real, it couldn't be real...

Time slowed, and slowed, and slowed, until the Doctor wondered if the entire fourth dimension was going to collapse into a single point. He'd thought, like the idiot he was, that if he activated the shrine's engines, he'd be able to communicate with its control systems. But the shrine was big, bigger than he'd expected, almost as powerful as one of the TARDIS units it had been modelled on. His mind wasn't strong enough to control it, not without the techniques of the Faction to help him. He wondered if he'd be here forever, frozen in this one moment of existence, never being able to break free of the shrine's grip.

Then this was it. The end. Or rather, an eternity of never having an end. No escape, no last-minute rescue.

Defeatist thinking.

But logical.

When have I ever been logical? And why am I arguing with myself, anyway?

You're arguing with yourself because you don't have anybody else to argue with. Except for the Spirits, but the Spirits don't care.

Oh no. You again. I thought you said you were a "temporary" psychosis?

I am. All this exposure to Paradox technology must have triggered a relapse. Don't worry about it, I'll be gone soon enough. Once you're used to the idea of spending the rest of your life here, anyway. Sorry, what were we talking about before?

I don't want to talk to you. Talking to one's madnenses is the first sign of madness.

Oh yes. We were talking about Sam. We were saying how convenient it was, that a girl like her should turn up just when you needed her most. And she does have two sets of biodata. You've guessed that, haven't you? Qixotl didn't notice it, but only because the two sets are so similar, from a non-human's point of view. Something's altered her timeline, Doctor. Something's filtered out her self-destructive impulses. Turned her into TARDIS fodder.

Don't be ridiculous. Who'd do a thing like... oh. Oh, I see.

What do you see?

You're saying Sam's a plant. An agent for another power, is that it?

Hmm. Not that I want to insult the girl, but I don't think Sam's quite cut out to be a Wolf of Fenric. Do you?

Rassilon!

I'm sorry?

Rassilon. He was the last major life force I met before Sam arrived on the TARDIS. If she's part of his game...

Oh, good grief. You have to blame him for everything, don't you? Nobody "planted" Sam. You've seen the truth, here in the ziggurat. You've seen the effect you can have on the universe. You've seen the damage you can do, without even lifting a finger. Without even having to be alive, come to think of it.

What are you suggesting?

Remember what I told you? About you being a living equation, a function of the universe. Well, suppose the function thinks it's incomplete. What happens then? Suppose, on some deep-rooted unconscious level, you feel like you need someone to be there for you. The function reaches out into the vortex... which is quite easy, let's be honest, because your biodata's wired into the vortex anyway... and finds someone. Someone it can make part of itself. A few little alterations to the timeline, that's all it takes.

I don't believe it. It's not possible.

You've got things in your biodata no one else has got, remember? Or you will have, at some point before you die. Things powerful enough to let your subconscious bend the timelines all by itself. That's why your biomass is so valuable, I'd guess. And that's the worst part, isn't it? You must affect everyone like that, one way or another. It's like I said. You never think of the consequences.

No. I still don't believe it.

Sam has two sets of biodata...

You're obsessed! There are things that can cause that kind of anomaly. You know that. Wrinkles in the continuum. Being on board the TARDIS would make her prone to that kind of distortion anyway.

Possibly. Possibly not. But what happens if you ever find out it's all your doing? The idea's been bothering you ever since the vault, I know it has.

No. If that were true, then... no. I won't listen.

'Doctor?'

Say what you like. I know you're wrong.

'Doctor, can you hear me?'

It's no good, I'm not going to... hold on a minute. Your voice has changed.

'Doctor, please try to listen.' It wasn't the psychosis speaking, the Doctor realised. He became aware of something else inside his split-second universe, another intelligence squeezing itself into the cracks. The Spirits howled and gnashed their teeth, obviously considering the intrusion to be rude.

'Marie,' thought the Doctor, knowing she'd be able to hear the thought.

Marie flexed the muscles of her pan-dimensional body, in a gesture the Doctor took to be a nod. 'I know who you are, Doctor. I had a long time to consider the situation. Or at least, parts of me did. It wasn't easy, working it all out. Not with my mind in that many pieces.'

'Homunculette said you were out of action.'

'A lot of my systems are still off-line. My memory isn't complete yet. But I can move. I know what you're doing, incidentally. Your plan to get rid of the Krotons. It's novel, I'll give you that much.'

The Doctor gave her the telepathic equivalent of a smile. 'I thought I could control the shrine. I was wrong. Can you complete the plan for me? If you materialise -'

'No. My structure isn't stable enough.' Marie hesitated for a moment. 'But I can help you. I can connect my telepathic circuits to those of the shrine. The technology's compatible, I think. I can get the shrine under control for you. You should be able to pilot it from where you are. Incidentally, did you know there's a smudge on your psychic template? It seems to be some kind of psychological dysfunction.'

'So it told me,' the Doctor said. 'Don't worry, it's only a bit of random angst. It'll sort itself out once this is over. If you'd be so kind as to engage the telepathic circuits...?'

'Consider it done,' said Marie.

Then the Spirits began to wail. Not their usual mindless screeching, the Doctor noted, but a cry of sheer frustration. They could feel the intruder in the systems, keeping them in check, bending the shrine to her will. Within moments, Marie had finished the job. The racket died down. The split-second universe cracked open, letting in pure molten time, first as a trickle, then as a

deluge.

Things started to move in the universe outside. Sam's mouth was closing. More worryingly, the Kroton was rolling through the doorway, its intake tube drooping from a split at the front of its body.

The Doctor stretched his nervous system, reaching out for the inner circuitry of the shrine. With all the energy his consciousness could muster, he ordered it to dematerialise.

Through the senses of the control growth, E-Kobalt watched the dynatropes move into firing positions around the City. The vessels were equipped with hyperbolic resonators, capable of cycling through every conceivable frequency in under a second, shaking apart anything from humanoid flesh to reinforced durilinium. More effective than simple dispersion weapons, E-Kobalt decided. Naturally, the devices had been grown on the looms of Quartzel-88, like so many of the Kroton Absolute's greatest creations.

And to think, pondered E-Kobalt, that I offered the Qixotl unit weapons like these in exchange for the Relic. A folly. It was so simple to capture the Relic by force.

The thought made it uneasy, for some reason. E-Kobalt tried to pin the feeling down, but it kept slipping through the links of its cranial unit. The grand notion was still throbbing away in its brain; kill the bipeds, smash the City. But then there was that other idea, smaller, yet just as intense, keeping a check on its aggressive instincts. Get the Relic first. Whatever you do, get the Relic first.

E-Kobalt wasn't used to thinking this way. Its brain wasn't exactly subtle, but it was at least capable of weighing up multiple options. Never before had it thought anything with so much clarity. Destroy, but wait. Destroy, but wait.

The sky turned black. It happened without warning, and it happened in a second.

In their dynatropes, the Warspear pilots panicked. E-Kobalt felt their vibrations on the fringes of its own mind, and for the first few seconds of the crisis its head spun out of control, trying to take in every detail at once. The control growth reported that the black ship, and indeed the whole Warspear, was no longer where it had been. The City had disappeared. So had all traces of the Earth. Instead, the Warspear was surrounded by walls.

E-Kobalt regained control of its sensory systems, and began to analyse the data the growth was feeding it. The dynatropes were trapped inside a box. The box was approximately two hundred metres along each side; the growth claimed that the surfaces were made out of an unidentified, and unidentifiable, material. E-Kobalt shifted its sensory apparatus a little, demanding a visual scan of the nearest wall.

It was decorated with humanoid remains. Skulls, they were called. There were thousands upon thousands of them, set into the wall at regular intervals, their faces painted with black dust and rotting biomass.

'Commander?'

E-Kobalt spun its head. A shape had materialised by its side, a blue smudge, hovering above the floor of the control section. It was the face of one of the bipeds, the one with the blue visual apparatus and the excessive cranial fur. E-Kobalt vaguely remembered that it had discovered the unit's identity, before it had left the ziggurat, but something seemed to be blotting the information out of its mind. The face was a hologram, according to the control growth, though the growth had no idea where it was being projected from.

'I-den-ti-fy-your-self,' E-Kobalt demanded, somewhat weakly.

The man in the hologram shook his head. 'There's no time, commander. You have to listen to me. I don't want to have to hurt you.'

E-Kobalt wasn't sure how to respond to that. 'You-have-no-pow-er-to-harm-the-Kro-ton-Ab-so-lute.'

'E-Kobalt, please. You're not thinking. It's the Shift. It's in your head, it's urging you to do things you shouldn't be doing. Try to concentrate. You know I'm telling the truth.'

The Shift? Suddenly, there was a brand-new thought in E-Kobalt's head. A realisation...

The central idea – the concept of absolute destruction, absolute aggression – rolled forward, thoroughly squashing the new notion. 'You-are-ly-ing,' E-Kobalt announced. 'You-will-explain-what-has-happ-ened-to-the-War-spear. You-will-tell-me-where-we-are.'

The man's eyes were tight shut, E-Kobalt saw, and small bubbles of salt-water were trickling down his upper cranial unit. It recognised these symptoms. The humanoid was under stress, possibly in a state of exhaustion. 'You're in the Faction's shrine. I've materialised it around you. E-Kobalt, I don't have time to argue. I can't hold on to the control systems much longer. You have to listen to me.'

'I-do-not-un-der-stand.'

'I told you. This is the shrine's cargo hold. It's like being inside a TAR... well, never mind.' A hand appeared, and wiped the hologram's brow. 'You can't attack the ziggurat as long as you're here. You might as well listen. The Shift wants you to destroy us. It's using you, commander.'

More new ideas popped up in the Kroton's forebrain, but the aggressive instinct flattened all of them. 'The-Kro-ton-Ab-solute-will-not-be-de-fea-ted!' E-Kobalt roared. 'You-will-rel-ease-the-dyna-tropes!'

The man on the hologram let out a deep, sorrowful breath. 'Very well. You leave me no choice.'

'You-will-re-lease-us!'

'No I won't, E-Kobalt. There's no way out for you. You're trapped.'

'We-will-pre-vail!'

'How? How are you going to get out? How are you going to destroy the ziggurat when you're stuck in here?'

'We-will-suc-ceed!'

'How, E-Kobalt? How?'

How?

E-Kobalt searched for an answer, but there was so little in its mind. In fact, it only had two ideas left to work with. One of them, the smaller of the two, was "get the Relic", but that was hardly appropriate now.

The other, the thought that occupied almost every part of whatever E-Kobalt had for a soul, was "destroy".

'Des-troy!' E-Kobalt shrieked.

The vibration rippled through the nervous systems of every Kroton in the Warspear. One idea, one simple command, more powerful than any other. From dynatrope to dynatrope, E-Kobalt felt the pilots reaching deep into their control cores, activating their weapons. The solution was simple, after all. They would blast their way out of the box. The prison would break open. The City would, ultimately, be destroyed.

The thought was a pure one, more satisfying than any other E-Kobalt could remember having. Strange, then, that even as it gave the firing order, a new idea began to blossom at the back of its mind. An idea that said, in a voice the commander didn't quite recognise: "stop".

But the weapons systems had already been engaged. E-Kobalt saw a look of relief cross the biped's face. Then the hologram faded into nothingness.

Of course, E-Kobalt was dead before it realised anything was wrong.

In less than a second, the Warspear's hyperbolic resonators cycled through their entire repertoire, slamming signals ranging from the ultrasonic to the infra-normal against the walls of the shrine, searching for the frequency that would tear the prison open. Of course, any known form of matter would have been susceptible to the vibrations. The loom-keepers of Quartzel-88 had been quite thorough when the weapons had been designed.

Unfortunately for the Krotons, the shrine wasn't made of matter. At least, not in the conventional sense. Like the ziggurat, it had been built out of sheer mathematics, the complex architectures of block transfer computation. Unlike the ziggurat, the people who'd made the shrine had got their sums right.

The cargo hold rang with a sound that was like all the other sounds in creation added together and amplified. The air was shaken apart by echoes on every conceivable frequency, including the ones to which the Warspear was susceptible, and the ones to which E-Kobalt's spacecraft was susceptible, and the ones to which the Krotons themselves were susceptible.

Moments later, the floor of the hold was carpeted with a layer of fine white frost. The skulls weren't even scratched.

The Doctor piloted the shrine back to the ziggurat before he let go of the control systems. Then he relaxed, remembering slightly too late that the intense concentration had been the only thing keeping him upright. His knees buckled, and he fell to the ground, although he liked to think he did it with some degree of style and elegance.

He lay there a while, staring up at the ceiling. Eventually, Sam's face appeared overhead.

'What happened?' she said.

'We won,' the Doctor told her. He squinted, as if that would make it easier to concentrate. There was something he was forgetting... oh yes. 'How's the Kroton? The one in the doorway?'

Sam glanced towards the corridor. 'You know what coleslaw looks like?'

'Yes.'

'That's how the Kroton is.'

'Good. The units in the ziggurat were in resonance with E-Kobalt, then. I thought as much. When the commander got shaken apart, all its friends got shaken apart, too.'

'You mean, like Bagpuss?'

The Doctor frowned. 'Obscure post-modern youth-culture reference. Ace would have been proud of you.'

Sam moved her lips to say something else, but the voice that came out of her mouth wasn't quite her own. 'YOU'RE BECOMING AN IRRITATION,' she seemed to say.

Ah. The Shift. It wasn't a physical entity, so it had survived the demise of the Warspear. Kroton weapons don't cycle through conceptual frequencies, the Doctor concluded. Now, there was a piece of information that would almost certainly never come in useful ever again. 'Ready to admit defeat yet?' he asked, pleasantly.

'NOT AT ALL. HOWEVER, I SUPPOSE I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO USE KROTONS AS CAT'S-PAWS. THEY'RE NOT VERY INTELLIGENT, ARE THEY?'

'It's your fault. If you hadn't spent so much time pumping up E-Kobalt's aggressive side, he wouldn't have opened fire.'

Sam looked puzzled by what the Doctor had said. Clearly, she had no idea the Shift was using her as a mouthpiece. Well, of course she hadn't, the Doctor reminded himself. The Shift was in his head, not hers. It wasn't changing her words, it was changing the way he *heard* her words. 'NEVERTHELESS, I'M AFRAID IT'S NOT OVER YET,' the Shift went on. 'THERE ARE OTHERS I CAN USE. EVERYBODY CAN BE MANIPULATED.'

'But right now, you're inside my personal head space. I'm right about that, aren't I?'

'YES. OH, DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE GOING TO GO INTO SENSORY WITHDRAWAL AGAIN. WE'VE BEEN THROUGH ALL THAT.'

'I wasn't going to.' Sam was shaking her head. The Doctor wondered what she was really saying, behind the Shift's words. 'You're forgetting something, "Mr" Shift. It wasn't just biodata sensitivity I picked up while I held the Presidency. We've got all sorts of secrets, where I come from.'

The Doctor could have sworn he saw Sam's eyes open wide in alarm. 'WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?'

'I'm saying I left a little something for you inside my mind, after the last time we met there. Ready?'

'Ready for what?' asked Sam. The Doctor felt the Shift moving around inside his consciousness. It was on the threshold, trying to escape through his senses, ready to pop out and into someone else's perceptions.

He flexed a neural muscle. He could have sworn he heard the sound of a cage door being swung shut on the inside of his head.

'Gotcha,' he said.

'Sorry, have you gone mad or something?' asked Sam, who'd completely missed the fact that anything had happened at all.

'I'll explain later,' the Doctor assured her. 'Now all we have to do is deal with the Relic. Ah. I seem to be lying on the floor. Could you help me up, do you think? Thank you.'

Mr Qixotl listened. Everything was quiet; the hall had even run out of muzak to spew at him. For once, nothing was shouting at him, swearing at him, or threatening him. He was the only one

there, if you could ignore the remains of the Raston lap-dancers. Well, so much for “the most perfect dancing machines ever devised”.

He sat on his chair, in front of the remains of the conference table, running his hand across the skin under his shirt. The hole was gone. Completely healed over. The shirt was a mess, but there was no sign of injury. Even his legs had been fixed up.

What kind of deal had he made, for pity’s sake? What had he let himself in for? He knew all about the Celestis, about the way they’d “mark” corporeal life-forms, so their souls would be under Celestine control even after death. But Trask had promised him, assured him, he hadn’t been marked. He’d simply been “reincorporated”. The Celestis had the power to do that, apparently, to bind someone to their mortal form and patch them up a bit. Qixotl didn’t know how the process worked. Too much like voodoo for his liking, really.

Two sets of footsteps came clumping down the corridor towards the conference hall, breaking the silence. Qixotl didn’t bother looking up. He knew who it’d be.

‘Quite a successful conclusion, all things considered,’ said the Doctor.

There was a long pause, so Qixotl assumed the Doctor had been talking to him. ‘Uh,’ he said.

‘The Krotons are gone, and the Shift’s out of the way, at least for the time being. All we have to do is deal with the Relic, and we can all go home.’

Qixotl finally looked up. The Doctor was staring at him expectantly. His companion hovered at his side, looking as awkward as ever.

‘The Relic,’ the Doctor prompted him. ‘Where is it?’

Qixotl shrugged. ‘Look, what can I say? I was dying. I got shot up by the Krotons. I would’ve bitten the dust if it hadn’t been for Trask.’

The Doctor looked confused. ‘Trask? Why, what did Trask do?’

‘He made the arrangements. With the Celestis. I didn’t have a choice, right? He made me this offer, before the auction got going. He said he’d give me the ability of, what do they call it, “perpetual reincorporation”. I mean, when it came down to it, he kind of backed out. He said he’d only reincorporate me the once, I could take it or leave it. I know, I know, I could have asked for more, but I was dying there, y’know?’

The human girl’s jaw dropped. ‘You mean...?’

‘Yeah. Trask saved my life. In exchange for the Relic. He took it back to Mictlan five minutes ago. Don’t *look* at me like that.’

THE DEAD MAN'S STORY

The Light

I have to tell my story. I have to give myself more time. I'm trying to stay in one piece... I mean, I'm trying to keep everything together, but...

Wait. Let me start again. I have to tell my story. Not because I think anybody's going to be interested, not because I think anybody's listening. I have to tell my story, because if I don't, then I'll forget it, and if I forget it, there won't be anything of me left.

Firstly. My name is Kristopher Patrick Englund, and I'm dead. That's the most important thing there is to know about me. My life isn't an important part of the story, but I'll say one thing, about the days when I walked and talked and thought for myself. I'll say that I remember being in a hospital, having something sick and twisted taken out of my body. I remember being on the operating table, with my eyes tight shut, feeling the doctors slicing me open. Hearing them talk about my insides while they went to work. Mumbles and scalpels.

I was supposed to have been unconscious. Some kind of slip-up with the anaesthetic, I think. I couldn't move, or speak, or open my eyes, but I could feel the edge of the knife cutting into me, slipping under the skin. That kind of thing's supposed to drive you mad, and I thought I was mad, back then, because that's when I started seeing things.

Yes. I remember. I could see everything opening up in front of me, like someone was cutting a hole in my head, the same way the doctors were cutting holes in my body. I remember watching the hole getting wider, and wider, until I could see the people living in the shadows on the other side.

That was the first time I met the Celestis. They said they'd opened up an "aperture in the space-time continuum" – I'm quoting them word for word, here – just so they could talk to me from their castle in the land of the dead. They told me they wanted me to serve them. I don't know if I should have been flattered or insulted, knowing they wanted me as a slave, but I was scared, and I was in pain, so I listened to what they had to say, and I believed every word.

All I had to do, the Celestis said, was let them give me their mark. They'd make sure I didn't die on the operating table, but in return, my identity would belong to them for the rest of eternity, however long that turned out to be. That's how they put it. "Identity". I remember wondering whether that meant I was giving them my soul.

So I said yes. I know, I know. I shouldn't have done it. Of course I shouldn't have done it, I don't think I was even in danger of dying in the hospital. But I said yes. I made the deal. I signed the contract. I got the mark.

When I recovered from the anaesthetic, so I could move and speak and open my eyes again, one of the doctors was standing over me with a big grin on her face. She had no idea I'd been conscious through the operation. As far as she was concerned, everything had gone smoothly. I didn't tell her the truth. I would have had to tell her about the Celestis, as well.

Anyway. I'm talking about my life too much. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to talk about what happened after I died.

I won't bother describing what it feels like to die. I'd have to start talking about out-of-body experiences, about floating down long dark corridors, etcetera etcetera etcetera. I died, that's all I've got to say about it, and the Celestis took my identity away, just like they'd said they would. I ended up in Mictlan, as promised.

Mictlan. The land of the dead. And I know it's not really the afterlife, I know it's only a place the Celestis built to keep themselves happy, but maybe I should say a few words about how things are there, because it's not like any afterlife you ever read about in the land of the living.

In the middle of Mictlan, there's a castle, and on the top floor of the castle there's the Grand Hall of the Celestis. I don't think I saw any of them step outside that Hall, not in all the time I was there. Then again, I never really saw the Celestis do anything, even though I had to take orders from them every day of my non-life.

Maybe I'd better explain. You can't look straight at the Celestis. You only get to watch them out of the corners of your eyes. The Grand Hall's hardly lit, so all you ever see are shadows. Sometimes, you can hear something rustling in the darkness, like cloth, and you get the feeling they're wearing robes, but other than that you can't say the first thing about the way they look. You can stare into the corners all you want, you're never going to see faces there.

And the rest of the Hall? Hard to describe it. There's so little there that's solid, so little you can focus on. Maybe I should talk about the way it feels, instead of trying to say what it looks like. You know those great big temples you get back in the land of the living, where all the politicians live? Think about the White House, or the House of Commons, or... well. Anyway. If you go to a place like that, you sometimes get the feeling there's something wrong with the building, like all the bad decisions and double-crosses have been soaked up by the walls. Well, that's what the Grand Hall felt like. Only worse.

There was a lot of empty space in the middle of the Hall, I remember that. The Celestis used to skirt around the edges, out of the way of the light (and I think the castle was lit by candlelight, by the way, although I don't remember seeing any candles). A lot of them sat up in the big galleries they had overlooking the Hall, so yes, they kept most of the floor clear. Whenever they opened up their "aperture" and reached out for the land of the living, that was where the hole would be, right in the middle of the Hall. When the Doctor arrived –

Wait. Wait. I'm going too fast. I was talking about my non-life in Mictlan.

As it turned out, the Celestis only wanted me as a kind of domestic servant. Don't ask why they chose me, out of all the human beings on Earth. Maybe they knew I was stupid enough to make a deal with them. Remember this, it's important; the Celestis love contracts, and they never break deals. The Grand Hall's the same as any other parliament – it's got its own set of rules, and the Celestis have to stick to those rules. When you're as powerful as they are, I suppose you need codes of conduct to hold you down, to stop things getting too easy. What I'm saying is, they can't force their mark on you, you have to agree to it. Once you've agreed, there's no escape clause. If you tried to back out, they'd treat it as a breach of the rules, and you don't want to annoy them like that.

So, I became one of their dead slaves inside the castle. This was a great honour, apparently, because most of the dead never got to see the castle, they had to spend eternity wandering the streets. Yes, Mictlan's got streets, although I never saw the outside. The other servants in the castle had been in Mictlan longer than I had, and I hated them for it. I hated their dull, lost-looking faces. I hated their mindless dried-up voices. And yes, I obeyed the Celestis without question, just like they did. And yes, after a while I started to look like them, as well. I tried to hold onto my identity, like I'm trying now. I kept telling myself who I was, I kept saying my own name over and over, but it wasn't long before it didn't sound like it meant anything.

How long did I work in the castle? I don't know. Time's different, there. All I know is this; I would have been as faceless as the Celestis by now, if it hadn't been for the Doctor.

Let me tell you how he came to the castle. I need to remember that, more than I need to remember anything else.

I was in the Grand Hall when it happened, answering questions for the Celestis in the higher galleries. Not that I was the centre of attention. They'd opened up an aperture in the centre of the floor, and most of them were busy watching events out in the land of the living. They were seeing how the war was going. Their favourite pastime.

Now, this is something I've never understood. There was a war ready to flare up, something to do with the Time Lords, although it wasn't my place to ask about the details. The Celestis were always watching through the aperture, waiting for the first big battle, arguing about which side they were supposed to be backing. And this is the thing that doesn't make sense to me. They could see the whole of the universe through the aperture, they could have watched any event from the beginning of time to the end. So, how could they not know the outcome of the war? Why didn't they just peek into the future and see how it all turned out?

Maybe it had something to do with those rules they kept making for themselves. Or maybe there are rules older than the Celestis, ones even they can't break.

So, they were waiting for the bloodshed to start, as usual. The ones in the higher galleries

were arguing about whether they could trust their human agents. That was why they were asking me questions, as a kind of psychological test. I didn't have much of a psychology left by this time, but I gave them the answers I thought they wanted to hear.

And in the middle of the argument, one of the Celestis on the floor of the Hall stepped forward, towards the aperture. For a second, I thought I was going to see his face, but the candlelight kept missing him somehow. I saw him lift up the Speaker's staff in his hand, and I saw him bang it against the floor, three times, to get the others' attention.

'The timeline is settling,' the Speaker said, once the rest had quietened down, and I can't describe his voice any more than I can describe his face. 'The Time Lords' forces are committed to an assault on Dronid. The enemy, as we've seen, is taking appropriate counter-measures.'

There were whistles and catcalls from the galleries, which was pretty much business as usual. 'Good luck to them,' someone shouted, and there were laughs from the floor. I think.

The Speaker sounded agitated, I remember thinking that at the time. 'This is a moment for firm decision,' he said. 'Are we to stay neutral, or are we to lend our support to the Time Lords?' (I might be paraphrasing a bit here.)

'Neutral! Neutral!' someone called.

'The Time Lords!' someone else suggested.

'The enemy!' yelled someone at the back, and that sparked off a few arguments. I'd picked up a thing or two about Celestine politics while I'd been working in the castle. Some of them had gone against official policy, I think, and given help to the Time Lords' enemies. I got the feeling more and more of the Celestis wanted to take that kind of action. They probably thought it'd make their lives more interesting.

And that was when I saw the aperture getting wider. I remember being surprised, because the hole never usually opened up without the Speaker's say-so. You could see the Celestis were excited, anyway. They mumbled and gibbered and chattered, and watched the aperture turn into a doorway, from Mictlan to the universe outside. The Speaker banged the staff against the floor, but I think he must have known no one was going to pay him any attention.

Finally, something appeared, something solid, right in the middle of the Grand Hall. Filling the aperture, like a cork stopping up a bottle.

It was a box. A big blue box. The corners were battered, so it looked as old as the hills, and the white letters on the sides were so worn down you could hardly read them.

The Doctor had turned up in Mictlan.

I can't let myself forget that.

All right, I'll admit it. I can't remember what the Doctor looked like. The kind of face he had, the kind of clothes... things like that weren't important. He was life, and he was right there in the land of the dead, that was all that mattered. I'd heard the Celestis talking about him, so I knew who he was the second I saw the box. And yes, I know there are lots of Doctors. I couldn't say which one it was that walked out into the Hall. I'd guess it was the last one. The oldest one. I know he acted old.

There was silence when he stepped onto the floor. I mean, real silence. I'd never heard that before, not in the Grand Hall. The Doctor looked around, squinting at the shadows, with a look of real contempt on his face. Whatever face it was.

'Tedious,' he tutted.

He turned a full circle, then gave a sarcastic salute to the galleries. 'Just like the old Council Chamber on Gallifrey,' he said, and you could see the other servants around the place taking deep breaths, like they were trying to suck the words into their bodies, like they thought they'd get their personalities back that way. 'Everything sour about Time Lord culture,' the Doctor went on. 'No more than I'd expect from the Celestial Intervention Agency.'

Well, when he said that, the Celestis came to life again. They started shouting, 'no, no, no,' and they didn't stop until the Speaker banged the staff against the floor.

'We are the Celestis,' the Speaker said. 'We are the Last Parliament. We acknowledge no other title.'

'You're a bunch of no-good interferes who should know better. Trying to decide which side to back in a war that doesn't even concern you. You should be ashamed of yourselves.'

'No, no, no,' the Celestis chanted. But the Doctor held up a finger, and they all went quiet. (Yes, I'm serious.)

'Time can't be toyed with by those who exist outside her limits,' the Doctor said. 'And I can't allow this to go on. I won't let you involve yourselves in the affairs of Dronid. You don't have the right.'

There was muttering. There was laughing, too, I think. 'Allow?' said the Speaker, but his voice sounded like nothing next to the Doctor's. 'Your opinions are unimportant. You have no power over us here. You have no authority in Mictlan.'

'No? Then how did I get here in the first place? How did I force the aperture open? I know the codes that control this grubby little afterlife of yours, don't forget that. I can come and go as I please. And I can destroy you all, if I feel it's necessary.'

There was a gasp of horror. At least, I think there was. I might have imagined it.

'You lie,' said the Speaker.

'Do I? Do you really want to take that chance?'

Even from the floor, you could hear the arguments in the galleries. The Celestis, squabbling among themselves, as usual. Some of them said they wanted the Doctor destroyed, but you could tell they were scared. Personally, I think the Doctor was bluffing. He carried it off well, though.

After a while, the Speaker called for silence again.

'I can't let you interfere on Dronid,' the Doctor repeated, before the Speaker could say anything. 'The situation's too unstable. You must know that.'

The Speaker gazed up at the galleries. 'Then... we could come to an agreement,' he said. I got the feeling he was looking to the others for support.

And, as one, all the Celestis went; 'Yes, yes, yes.'

'What did you have in mind?' said the Doctor. He sounded suspicious, and who could have blamed him?

'We can agree not to involve ourselves in the affairs of Dronid. We can agree not to further influence the conflict. In return, we would require something from you. Compensation.'

'I see. Presumably, you're going to ask for more than just a pound of flesh.'

I remember looking around the Hall, then. I remember seeing the shadows leaning forward, waiting for the Speaker to make his offer. Can shadows hold their breath? If they can, they must have done it then.

'We want the only thing you possess that we can utilise,' the Speaker said. 'We want your body.'

I don't remember the look on the Doctor's face, but he must have been shocked by that. He probably shook his head. 'Ridiculous. Make me another offer.'

'No. We consider the exchange reasonable. You believe in the responsibility of the individual. You believe in the nobility of self-sacrifice. This is an opportunity to prove your dedication to these basic ideals. We want your body. Only if you surrender it to us can we consider doing as you ask. The deal is a fair one.'

And I knew the Speaker meant it, too. It's like I said, the Celestis never go back on a deal. Really, I suppose they could have opened up the aperture and stolen the Doctor's body from anywhere in space and time, but they don't work like that, it's against their rules. I knew what they'd do. They'd watch the body from the Grand Hall, and they'd try to mark anyone who was unlucky enough to go near it, just to make sure it stayed in their sights. But there'd be a time when it'd fall into their hands, no question. If the Doctor agreed to the deal, anyway.

So, what happened next? Yes. I remember. The Doctor turned on his heel, and started pacing the floor in front of his box. The Celestis stayed hushed all the while. Now, to be honest, I don't think all of them liked the idea of this deal. I think some of them didn't want to get involved with the Doctor, even on their own terms. But no one wanted to say it out loud.

'Very well,' the Doctor said, after a minute or two. 'It's a bargain. But with one or two minor stipulations.'

The word "stipulations" always made the Celestis edgy, but they kept quiet. The Doctor lifted up his hand, and swept it around the Grand Hall, pointing at all the blank-eyed servants standing about the place. Me included.

'These unfortunates,' the Doctor said. 'I want you to free them.'

I wish I knew how I felt at that moment, but I don't. All I know is, the Speaker started rustling his robes. 'We could release our servants from their contracts, if we chose to. But it would be an empty gesture. We would simply recruit more of them from the land of the living. You gain nothing from this stipulation.'

'Every soul saved makes a difference,' the Doctor told him. 'You wouldn't understand.'

The Speaker thought it over. Then he said; 'Acceptable.'

Everyone started grumbling in the galleries. The Doctor nodded. 'Good. Stipulation number two...'

He kept talking, of course. But I don't remember any more of what he said.

I just remember seeing the faces of the other servants, the ones who'd been lucky enough to be in the Doctor's sight when he'd swept his hand around the Hall. I'd hated all those other slaves, because they'd been so empty, so blank, so... all right, I'll say it. So dead. But things were different, now the Doctor had made his bargain. For that one moment in Mictlan, they looked real again. They looked human. Even the ones who'd never been human in the first place.

Then there was light. Do I need to describe the light? It's everywhere, now. I can't see anything, I can't feel anything, I can only remember.

Maybe I shouldn't try to remember. I get the feeling I should let go, let the light take me. But I don't know. I've been struggling to keep my identity for so long, I don't want to lose it now.

My name is Kristopher Patrick Englund. I'm dead. I'm dead, but no longer walking, no longer talking. I'm telling myself my own story, over and over, until I forget all the little details, and the last of me finally goes to meet the light. I'm struggling, because that's the only thing I know how to do.

Let me see. Should I start again? I think I should.

I remember being on an operating table...

14

FINAL OFFER

Kathleen Bregman, a.k.a. Lieutenant Kathleen Bregman, a.k.a. Miss Chicken-Legs, could still walk, talk, slouch, and scratch. As far as she was concerned, these were good signs that she was still alive. Unfortunately, nobody else around here seemed to agree with her.

The streets were full of people, although the people weren't much more than shadows. They lurked in the doorways of buildings, and skulked behind streetlamps in the alleyways, but they looked scared to step out into the wet-Thursday-afternoon daylight. Their features were half-formed, indistinct, all traces of identity scrubbed away by the sheer tedium of the place. Bregman had tried talking to them, once or twice. They'd been quite adamant they were dead.

'Dead?' Bregman had queried.

Yes, they'd told her, definitely dead. This was Mictlan, the land of the dead, the place where souls were sent once they were used up and hollowed out. Bregman had read enough South American *Demonika* comics to recognise the name. This, in her own poxy orthodox Euro-Christian terms, was purgatory.

When Bregman had been a child, she'd lived near a corporation-owned housing estate in the Lausanne sub-suburbs, one of those concrete-lined holes the Swiss government liked to shovel Dutch immigrants and welfare addicts into. The sky had always been grey there; even the clouds had been uglier than the ones over the city centre. The roads had been littered with dead pets and burned-out cars, the gutters had been full of syringes, and there had always been wet patches on the pavements where the local children had ceremonially kicked each other half to death.

That was Mictlan. That was exactly how it looked, that was exactly how it felt. Everywhere, there was the smell of urine and fried food. The dead were the ultimate underclass, Bregman realised. The universe had the same contempt for them that the Swiss had for the Dutch.

She walked for hours, or for what felt like hours, but the sub-suburbs never ended. When she finally sat down, on a patch of dead grass by the side of an empty road, it was out of boredom, not because she was tired. She didn't seem to need rest here, and she guessed she wouldn't be able to sleep, either. It was true, then. She was dead, and this was eternity. The idea should have appalled her, but to be honest, she didn't have the strength to be appalled.

Across the street, the shadow of an apartment block stretched, yawned, and spat out another one of the dead. That was how people arrived here, Bregman had noticed; the shadows gave birth to them. The man was more active than the other zombies Bregman had seen, but she guessed that wouldn't last long. The new arrival looked around, with some distaste, before his eyes finally settled on Bregman.

He hopped across the road. As he came closer, Bregman recognised him as the man from the ziggurat, the one Sam had called the Doctor. His clothes were colourful, eccentric, although you could tell Mictlan was tugging at the fibres, trying to tear the character out of the material.

'Lieutenant Bregman, isn't it?' he said, stopping in front of her. 'I wasn't expecting to see you here.'

Bregman stood. The Doctor's voice was full of life, even here in the land of the dead. The way he spoke, you could have sworn he was introducing himself at a cocktail party. 'Everyone ends up here, don't they?' she said.

The Doctor tutted. 'I shouldn't think so. Not unless you're an agent of the Celestis. Even *I* had to force my way in.' A thought seemed to strike him, and he peered at Bregman's face a little more closely. 'But you're not working for the Celestis. I'm sure I'd be able to tell if you were. So why are you here?'

'Because I'm dead,' Bregman said. Stupid question, surely?

'No. You're as alive as I am. You're suffering the side-effects of a Paradox control rite, that's all. You need time to recover.' Suddenly, he slapped a hand against his forehead. 'The Faction.'

Their rituals must use the same techniques as the Celestis... of course! Grandfather Paradox!’

‘Come again?’

‘Grandfather Paradox. The stories say he was a Time Lord, but there’s no record of his existence on Gallifrey. He must have done the same thing the Celestis did. He must have erased himself from the timeline and put himself into conceptual space. I wonder if the Celestis realise? They must have some idea, there’ll be Faction victims all over the place...’

Bregman was starting to get irritated. But then, she reasoned, maybe that was a good sign. At least she had enough feeling left in her to get irritated by something. ‘So let me get this straight. This is Mictlan, right?’

‘It’s the realm of the Celestis. They call it Mictlan. Personally, I’d rather not give them the satisfaction.’

‘Then why are *you* here?’

‘Oh, I’ve got an appointment with the Celestis,’ the Doctor told her. ‘I don’t think they know it yet, though.’ Then he turned, a full 180 degrees, and shaded his eyes.

Bregman followed his lead. On the skyline, looming over the houses of the dead, was the silhouette of something that reached up as far as the eye could see. Bregman felt part of her stomach try to crawl up into her mouth. The structure towered over the rest of Mictlan, but until now she hadn’t even noticed it. Maybe the building was too obvious to notice, she thought. It was the heart of Mictlan, the point everything revolved around. It looked so natural, it hadn’t seemed worth thinking about until the Doctor had pointed it out.

‘The castle of the Celestis,’ the Doctor explained. But it didn’t look like a castle, not to Bregman. Back on the estate in Lausanne, there’d been a multi-storey car park, and the car park had been the focal point of everything sick and ugly and miserable. No one had ever used the top three floors, because the lights had all been smashed, and it had been two-o’clock-in-the-morning dark there even in the middle of the day. Teenagers had used the basements levels as crack-houses, while tramps had used the stairwells as public toilets.

The building on the skyline looked like a car park, too, but it had an infinite number of levels, stretching up through the clouds of factory pollutant that formed Mictlan’s sky. In fact, the structure looked like several dozen car parks piled on top of each other, some levels overhanging the levels underneath them, the access ramps jutting out at awkward, random angles. The supporting columns – and there were thousands of them – were cracked and crumbling, covered in layer upon layer of grit and dirt, built up over centuries, maybe millennia.

In short, it was the worst place in the universe.

‘You want to go there?’ said Bregman. ‘Why, for God’s sake?’

The Doctor leaned towards her, conspiratorially.

‘I’m half-stupid,’ he said. ‘On my mother’s side. If you feel up to the walk, it’d be nice to have some company.’

Up close, the castle/car park looked even worse than Bregman had expected. She guessed it’d take a good few hours to walk all the way around the base of it, so God knew how long it’d take to get to the top level. Through the opening at the front of the building, she could see the layout of the ground floor, a concrete hangar the size of a football field, marked with lines of white paint and splashes of dried blood. Bare yellow bulbs hung from the ceiling in their thousands, filling the building with a sick electric light, while the dead loitered in the shadows of the supporting columns, doing nothing in particular, the way only the dead really know how to do nothing in particular. The columns were stained with black graffiti, Bregman noticed, although you couldn’t make out the letters. Presumably, there were no names in Mictlan.

The Doctor took it all in, but didn’t seem fazed. Bregman wondered whether he was seeing a car park, too, or something worse. She felt it was fair to assume this was *her* version of purgatory. She doubted it’d look the same to anyone else.

A couple of minutes later, they found the way up to the next level, a fifteen-metre-wide stairwell set halfway along the ground-floor wall. The steps were huge, big enough to make Bregman think of a set from an old Hollywood musical. You could imagine the leading lady high-kicking her way down the stairs, belting out the theme song and trying not to break her stilettos on the solid concrete. The bulbs at the top of the stairway had blown, so everything faded into darkness after

the first few dozen steps.

The Doctor started bounding up the stairs, two or three at a time. Bregman tried to keep up with him, but failed miserably. In the end, she had to shout at him to stop.

'I'm not well, all right?' she said, when she saw him glance back at her over his shoulder.

The Doctor looked agitated, but at least he'd stopped bouncing. 'I don't suppose there's any need to hurry. I was hoping to catch Trask before he handed the Relic over to the Celestis, but I think we're already too late for that. We're going to have to deal with the Celestis face-to-face.'

'"We"?''

The Doctor seemed taken aback. 'I'm sorry?'

Bregman stopped a couple of steps below him, and caught her breath. 'You wanted me to follow you here, OK? And so far, all I'm doing is slowing you down. Whatever you're doing, it's got nothing to do with me. I don't even know why you're here. So why drag me along? I mean, don't think I'm not enjoying the experience or anything.'

But the Doctor turned out to be entirely sarcasm-proof. 'It's got something to do with a tree falling in a forest,' he said, as if that explained everything. 'Oh, look. We've got company.'

Bregman looked up. At the top of the stairway (or, more accurately, at the point where the stairway vanished into the darkness), things were moving. Person-shaped things, shambling down the steps, muttering among themselves as they descended. Without thinking, Bregman took a step backwards, and almost lost her balance.

More of the dead. You could tell by the way they walked. But these moved with a purpose, and you could see, even through the shadows, that they had some traces of identity left in them. The zombie elite, Bregman guessed. The chosen ones of Mictlan. One by one, the shapes staggered into the light, their eyes fixed on the Doctor.

The first of the dead men was black. He wore a brilliant red flower on his lapel, and there was a sharp white grin cut into his face, but it was a corpse's grin, the grin of someone who no longer had any need for a sense of humour.

Behind him, there were two figures dressed in dark designer suits, their faces pale, their hair cropped in a military style. Both wore sunglasses, which hardly seemed appropriate here, and both had their hands tucked into their inside jacket pockets, fondling the handles of concealed firearms.

Two more humanoid figures stumbled into the light after them. Bregman thought of the slimy drug dealers you used to see in programmes like *Miami Narcs*. The men had tanned skin and greasy hair. Their teeth were sharpened to points, and they wore gold medallions around their necks, although Mictlan had worn down the metal until it was almost as grey as the stairwell itself.

Next came a short, square-shouldered man, his hair slicked back and greying at the temples, his eyes points of black in a flabby white face. He looked like every Godfather figure in every gangster movie ever made, and his head was almost lost in the enormous fur wrap he wore around his neck. The wrap was wriggling on his shoulders, needle-sharp teeth snapping at each end. A fashion accessory that wanted its own back.

The last two figures were both alien. The first was jet black in colour, covered in a carapace much like a beetle's, its arms ending in enormous lobster-like claws. Two steps above it stood a shape dressed in an ornate golden robe, a huge semicircular collar raised behind its head. Bregman got the feeling the robe was supposed to be a parody of a much more elegant style of clothing.

The eight figures, Mictlan's finest, marched down the steps in perfect time, until the nearest of them wasn't more than a metre or two from the Doctor. Then they stopped.

'The agents of the Celestis,' the Doctor mused. He didn't seem worried, and he hadn't backed away while the dead had been advancing. He glanced over his shoulder. 'It's all right, Kathleen. They're only puppets. Stand behind me, you'll be quite safe.'

Bregman hopped down a couple of steps anyway, but she didn't take her eyes off the dead. 'Safe how, exactly?'

'You're not really here, remember. Your mind is in Mictlan. Your body's safely back on Earth.'

'And what about you?'

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'I'm afraid I brought my body with me. I didn't really have a

choice. Ah. Mr Trask.'

A ninth figure had appeared out of the darkness. Bregman almost choked. It was the thing... the person... the *man*... she'd met in the ziggurat, just after she'd arrived in the Unthinkable City. The one who'd made her throw up.

And he was still smiling.

'Not true,' the creature told the Doctor.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Not true. Not safe. Her mind is here. So we can mark it. Make her one of ours.'

Bregman had no idea what this meant, though she saw the muscles tense up all over the Doctor's body, so she guessed it wasn't nice. 'You wouldn't dare,' he said.

'We could. We won't. Not the way we work. Never mark agents against their will. Never.' Trask indicated the figures around him with a stiff, mechanical wave. 'Us. All of us. We chose this. Chose to serve the Celestis.'

Bregman tried to focus on the man's face, but failed, the same way she'd failed the last time she'd seen him. Like most of the dead souls in Mictlan, he'd lost everything that had made him human, until his face was just a collection of lumps and holes, a shape without meaning.

As she watched, something else floated out of the shadows. It was the casket, Bregman realized. The moment it appeared, the Doctor's body went stiff as a board.

'The Relic,' Trask said. 'It's ours. Paid for it. Rules of the auction. We won.'

"Rules"? "Won"? The Doctor turned to Bregman again. 'You see how the Celestis think? Whatever happens in the real world, it's all a game to them. Without their bodies to hold them down, all they've got to worry about are their own little political feuds. They don't care who wins the war, as long as it makes life more interesting for them.'

'Yes,' said Trask. 'Games are important. Rules are important. Always obey the rules. Always honour agreements. Always keep deals. Cheating, otherwise. Like you cheat.'

The Doctor sniffed petulantly. 'I never cheat. Admittedly, I do sometimes make the game more complex, but I never cheat.'

'The Celestis had a deal. With you. You broke it.'

'Deal? What deal?'

Ancient muscles cracked and flexed inside Trask's face. 'The Celestis agreed. To let you conclude the battle on Dronid, in your own way. Without interference. In return, you promised. Promised your body. Now you want to steal it back. Cheating.'

'Not true,' the Doctor protested. 'I've never even met the Celestis, I've certainly never made any deals with them.'

'You will. One day.'

The Doctor looked alarmed. 'You're trying to hold me to a promise I haven't actually made yet?'

'Yes.'

'But that's not fair!'

'You promised. You made a deal. In your future.' And as one, the other figures on the stairway began to move again, those at the back of the formation turning to flank the Doctor. Trask kept croaking. 'We need your body. The Celestis need your body. To give you the mark. To make you ours. Our agent.'

Bregman hopped down another couple of steps, but the Doctor stayed where he was, his head held high. 'You can't have the Relic,' he reiterated, obviously doing his best to keep his voice steady.

'Don't want it. Don't want your body. Not the body in the coffin. Not any more. Something better.'

'I'm sorry?' said the Doctor.

'Dead body would make a good agent,' Trask went on. 'Not as good as your live body, though. No need for recorporation. Five regenerations left. Useful.'

All of a sudden, the Doctor seemed nervous. 'You can't have me, Trask. Not while I'm alive. You said so yourself. The Celestis' agents have to agree to be given the mark, of their own free will. It's the rules. And I don't agree.'

'Already have. You made a deal. You said we could have your body. You agreed. We never

specified. Never said it had to be dead. Within the terms of the agreement. We never cheat.'

'You're going to try and give me the mark?' the Doctor spluttered. The dead had arranged themselves in a tight cluster around him, and the men in black had moved into position behind his back, to stop him retreating. As far as Bregman could tell, though, he didn't look like he was going to make a run for it. 'That doesn't make sense. If you thought you had the right to mark me at any time in my life, because of a promise I haven't even made yet, then why haven't you come for me before now?'

'We were waiting. For you to come to us. More powerful here. Here in Mictlan. Our territory. No way out.'

'I demand to see the Celestis personally!'

'No. Not yet. Not time. We can give you the mark ourselves. Make you one of us.'

'You can't -'

'We can,' said Trask. 'Feel.'

And that was when, at long last, the Doctor tried to get away. He turned to run, but the alien with the black carapace snapped one of its claws shut across his shoulder, and the Hispanic thugs reached out to grab his arms. There was no point struggling, after that. Seconds later, every part of his body was being pinioned by the dead.

The living fur wrap barked excitedly. The black man's smile became a blur of brilliant white. The Doctor's eyes met Bregman's, and in that one moment, Bregman was sure she was ready to wake up and find herself back in the ziggurat.

Then his head jerked back. There was a tiny noise from the back of his throat. Bregman looked towards the top of the stairway, and saw Trask, standing motionless, his grin still in place, his eyes fixed on the Doctor. The mark, thought Bregman, that was what he'd said. The Doctor was being branded, turned into an agent of Mictlan. Trask was reaching into his skull, scratching something across the surface of his mind.

She didn't move. Couldn't move. She stood and watched until, eventually, it was all over.

The dead let go of the Doctor's limbs. His head lolled forward, and his arms dropped to his sides. The zombies moved away, leaving him to stand on his own two feet. He wobbled for a few moments, but he managed to stay upright. Finally, he opened his eyes.

The first thing he did was look at Bregman, and Bregman would have screamed, if she'd been alive enough to really care. There was something tearing and thrashing inside his head, you could see it in his irises, something trying to gouge out his memories and rip up his personality. There was no emotion on his face. No trace of feeling.

'Interesting,' he said.

He spun on his heel, to face Trask. The rest of the dead were stumbling away, being swallowed up by the darkness at the top of the stairs, but Trask didn't move.

'Concentrated Celestine consciousness,' the Doctor went on. 'Planted directly in the mind of the subject, without any need for surface psychic or psionic penetration.'

'Yes,' said Trask.

'Doctor?' Bregman said. She wanted to say something caring and considerate, like "how are you?", but she knew how stupid it'd sound. Besides, the Doctor was ignoring her.

'What should I do?' the Doctor asked Trask.

'Go back to Earth. Return to your TARDIS. You will be given orders. When we need you. The Celestis can contact you directly. Through the mark.'

'And the Relic?'

The casket was hovering at Trask's feet, anxiously bobbing up and down on its antigravs. 'Worthless,' Trask declared. 'Your timeline has changed. The Relic is a paradox. Too dangerous. Too dangerous to use. Could strengthen the Faction. Can't be allowed.'

'Shall I destroy it?' the Doctor asked.

Trask nodded, his head creaking on top of his rigor-mortis neck. The Doctor put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled. The casket obediently wobbled down to his level. It seemed glad to get out of Trask's presence.

Satisfied, Trask turned away, and began climbing the stairs. Seconds later, he disappeared into the darkness, along with the rest of Mictlan's elite.

The Doctor caught Bregman's eye again. There was a fraction of a smile on his lips.

'Wake up,' he said. And he snapped his fingers.

'Isn't there any way we can scan the City for him?' asked the human girl. Sam, Qixotl reminded himself.

'Treat me with a little kindness and understanding here, OK?' he said. 'I've already died once today. Y'know, a thing like that doesn't get you in a great mood. Anyway, the Doctor's going to be fine. Really. I mean, wherever he's got to.'

'Right,' Sam murmured.

Actually, Qixotl had a pretty good idea where the Doctor had got to. As soon as the Time Lord had found out about Trask, he'd stormed out of the conference hall, turned the corner... and vanished. Sam had searched the corridor, but there hadn't been any sign of him. Which kind of suggested the Doctor had gone to Mictlan after Trask, though Qixotl couldn't for the life of him figure out how.

And if that were true, then he probably wouldn't be coming back. By rights, Qixotl should have been on his ship and out of this solar system by now, but he had the horrible feeling that if he left the City without debriefing the other bidders, they'd be following him around until doomsday, demanding to know what he'd been trying to pull. So he was lounging around the conference hall with Sam, waiting for the others to show up, and wondering exactly how many of them had been killed by the Krotons.

'I could do with some help,' the Doctor said.

Qixotl yelped, and fell off his chair. The Doctor had reappeared in the archway, his face all twisted and crumpled, like he was sucking on the biggest citrus fruit in history. The UNISYC Lieutenant was leaning against him, looking dazed and wobbly. More importantly, the Relic was hovering in the passageway behind the two of them, glowing cheerily.

Sam jumped to her feet, and hurried over to the Time Lord's side like a little puppy. She took the Lieutenant's arm, then led the woman towards the nearest available chair. The Doctor collapsed against the frame of the archway, looking exhausted.

'I see you, er, got the stiff back,' Qixotl ventured.

The Doctor stared at him.

The stare was horrible. Really, really nasty. Qixotl could see things in the Doctor's eyes, terrible churning things, trying to break free of his head.

'Don't trust him,' gurgled the Lieutenant.

'Don't trust who?' said Sam.

The woman raised her hand, and pointed an accusing finger at the Doctor. Her face was a deathly white, Qixotl saw, and her limbs were seriously shaking. 'He's one of them. One of the dead. He's got the mark. I saw it. I saw it happen.'

'Oh, hell,' said Qixotl.

Sam gawped at the Doctor. 'Doctor...?'

He shook his head. His face was scrunched up like a piece of old wrapping paper, and for the first time, Qixotl realised he was actually in pain, not just gurning for comic effect.

'The Matrix,' he hissed.

'The what?'

'The world of the Celestis. Pure information. Outside the physical universe. It's like the Matrix. The same technology. The Celestis must have used the Matrix to build it.'

Qixotl tried to figure out what the Doctor was talking about. Yeah, they said the Matrix was more than just a computer the Time Lords used to predict the future; they said it was a whole mini-universe, made out of solid facts. And yeah, from what Qixotl had heard about the Celestis, their home – Mictlan, right? – was the same kind of set-up. But so what?

'I'm an ex-President of the High Council of Gallifrey,' the Doctor continued. The words sounded forced, like they'd got themselves stuck in his windpipe, and it was taking him all his strength to cough them out. 'I've worn the Sash of Rassilon. And the Coronet. The Coronet of Rassilon. It puts you in direct contact with the Matrix. My biodata... my biodata contains the codes for manipulating the Matrix. That's how I got to Mictlan. The Celestis opened an aperture for Trask. I managed to... to force my way through it... while it was still open...'

Suddenly, Qixotl got the point. 'You mean, you can manipulate the Celestis' place, as well?'

Whee. Impressive.'

The Doctor clenched his teeth a little harder. 'No. Not all of it. But their science... Celestine consciousness... there's a link. An affinity. I built a cage. In my mind.' He tapped his forehead, just in case anyone didn't know where he kept this mind he was talking about.

Sam looked from the Doctor to Kathleen to Qixotl, obviously not following most of this. 'A cage for what?'

'The Shift.'

'The Shift's in your head?'

'Yes. Yes. Trapped.' The Doctor gripped the frame of the arch, to steady himself. 'Trask tried to mark me. Pure Celestine consciousness. Pushed it. Right into my mind.'

And then, despite the pain he seemed to be in, despite the fact that his legs looked ready to give up and dump him on the floor at any moment, a grin broke out across his face.

'He missed,' the Doctor said.

Qixotl's jaw dropped. 'He marked the Shift?'

The Doctor nodded.

'But the Shift works for the... er, for the enemy.'

'I know. The enemy marked the Shift when they created it. The Celestis have marked it again. The Shift's becoming schizophrenic. The conflict of interests is tearing it apart.' The Doctor put his hands to his head. 'It's taking my mind to pieces. Rattling the bars of the cage. I'm afraid I'm going to go mad.'

He wobbled on his feet. Sam rushed up to him, and kept him from toppling over. 'What do we do?'

'We have to get back to the TARDIS. I can download the Shift into the telepathic circuits, seal it inside one of the memory cells. You'll have to help me.'

'Right.' Sam took the Doctor's arm, and the Doctor turned, to face the corridor behind him. He was about to walk away when a thought seemed to strike him. He looked over his shoulder.

'Kathleen?' he said.

The UNISYC Lieutenant stared back at him. She didn't speak.

'You remember the alien you saw in Mictlan? The one wearing the robes?'

Kathleen nodded.

'That's the enemy,' the Doctor said. 'Try to forget you ever saw it. I know *I* will.'

She nodded again.

'Qixotl?'

Qixotl swallowed. The Doctor gave him another one of those scary looks.

'If you see Marie, give her my thanks. Tell her I couldn't have done it without her. And one more thing.'

'Er, yeah?'

'Later,' said the Doctor, meaningfully. And with that, he staggered away down the corridor, Sam keeping him more or less upright. The Relic moved aside to let them pass, then floated after them. The last thing Qixotl saw of them was Sam's face, looking back at the hall, and mouthing something to the UNISYC Lieutenant. Qixotl didn't see what the message was. Some kind of goodbye, he guessed.

A few minutes later, the rest of the bidders started wandering back into the conference hall. They weren't in a very good mood.

Homunculette pressed his hands against the emergency console, feeling the pulse of the engines under his palms. Strictly speaking, type 103 TARDIS units were designed to respond to vocal commands, there was no need for him to set the controls manually. But it seemed appropriate. This was Marie's first proper journey since the repair job, and Homunculette felt she ought to have it easy. Just this once.

He realised he was starting to get sticky thoughts again. He distracted himself by concentrating on something that made him feel bitter and twisted.

'He betrayed us,' he grumbled, out loud.

'The Doctor?' queried Marie. Her voice echoed around the dome of her control room. The room was looking good now, if you could overlook the scars across the access panels.

Homunculette grunted in the affirmative. 'He knew how much we needed the Relic. He should have handed it over. He's a Time Lord, he's supposed to be on our side.'

Marie sighed, and the sigh filled the room with fresh, clean, ion-scented air. Homunculette felt it brush against his face, and was surprised how good it felt. 'He couldn't involve himself,' Marie insisted. 'Not in his own future. The Seventh Law of Time, remember.'

'Seventh?'

'I think it's the seventh.'

'Then why did he take it with him? Why didn't he just leave it alone? The Relic was our last chance, and he knew it.' Homunculette dug his fingernails into the skin of the console. 'I'll tell you what really gets to me. He was the worst interventionist we ever had. He was supposed to be famous for the way he kept sticking his nose in. And all of a sudden, he's lecturing us about causality.'

'I don't think you're being very fair,' Marie cooed. 'He *did* save our lives.'

Homunculette ignored her. 'We'll get that body. Don't you worry. We'll get that body if we have to kill him ourselves.'

'I hope you're not serious,' Marie said. But Homunculette had already given the dematerialisation order.

Manjuele kicked some of the dust out into the corridor. The dust had once been a Kroton war machine, he'd been told, but the Doctor had done something or other to make it fall to pieces. Manjuele hoped the process had hurt. Anything that looked like a Canadian Home Guard riot-tank with arms deserved to die in agony, as far as he was concerned.

By the dais, Justine picked up the biosampler, slipped it over her fingers, and rolled up her sleeve. She hadn't said a word since they'd left the conference hall. Manjuele got the feeling she was going to freak out on him any second.

'You 'kay?' he said. He'd never asked the Cousin anything like that before. He wondered if he was getting soft. What the hell, maybe he'd have a better chance with her if he acted all cute and concerned.

'We failed,' Justine told him. And there was no feeling in her voice at all.

Manjuele shrugged, although Justine had her back turned to him. 'We can stiff the Doctor. Need bigger guns, s'all.'

'The Doctor did what he had to. As we all must.' Justine checked the collection valves. 'Let us hope the Grandfather judges us less harshly than he judged Cousin Sanjira.'

'Who?' said Manjuele.

'Nobody you'd remember,' Justine sighed. She stuck the biosampler into her arm, and the skulls began to hum.

There were less insects on the way back to the village than there had been on the way to the City. At least, Bregman didn't feel as many of them trying to rip her cardiovascular system out. She wondered if they all clocked off after sunset.

A few metres ahead of her, Colonel KorteZ came to a sudden halt. He raised his arm, to point at something in the distance, where the trees thinned out and the sky was lit by spots of electric silver. Lamps, Bregman reckoned, hanging from the higher branches. The Colonel didn't extend a finger. He couldn't, with the medipac bandages wrapped around his hands like that. Qixotl had assured them the wounds would heal, but Bregman wouldn't have trusted Qixotl's opinion on a paper cut.

'The village,' KorteZ said. 'Remember, Lieutenant. The village is not what it seems.'

'No, sir.'

Bregman expected him to start marching again, but instead he stood there for a while, staring into space. Business as usual, then, she thought.

'Lieutenant,' said KorteZ.

'Sir?'

'I left you to die, Lieutenant. In the vault.'

Bregman had no idea what she was supposed to say to that. So she said, 'Sir?'

'All things happen as they will. However, I can't help feeling... it's a question of karma. You

understand? Karma.'

He paused again. He looked like he was waiting for the world to turn around him.

'I may need help, Lieutenant. When we get back to Geneva. You'll tell the General everything?'

'Yes, Sir.'

Kortez nodded. Then he carried on marching, stomping a path through the undergrowth towards the village. 'We'll be reporting failure, of course,' he said, as he walked. 'Don't let that worry you, though, Lieutenant. General Tchike will be expecting failure. I'm sure of it.'

Bregman followed in his footsteps, without another word. In the vault, she'd told herself there was no point struggling. She'd told herself she was just a stupid human, part of the universe no one really gave a toss about. She understood, now, that Kortez had reached the same conclusion, when he'd come face-to-face with the Selachians all those years ago. He was like one of the zombies in Mictlan, a hollowed-out soul, a slave to anything that looked bigger and smarter than him. So here he was, completely out of control of his life, giving in to whatever "destiny" seemed to make sense to him at the time. Displacer Syndrome at its worst.

But the Doctor had shown her the truth. He hadn't meant to, but he'd given the game away. He'd needed her in Mictlan, because without her, he would have been a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it. Not making a sound, not making a difference. However big and smart the other things in the universe thought they were – the Time Lords, the Celestis, Faction Paradox, whatever – they needed Bregman, and all the others like her. Without her, all the games they played across the universe, all the auctions and the wars and the power struggles, were utterly meaningless. They were ideas without heads to live in. Gods without followers.

Kathleen Bregman, a.k.a. Lieutenant Kathleen Bregman, a.k.a. Miss Chicken-Legs, was a real-life, honest-to-goodness stupid human. Ergo, she was one of the most powerful beings in existence.

Yeah. She could live with that.

All she needed now was the chance to shoot at some Cybermen, and she'd be happy.

LOST RITES

[THE PRESENT]

The dinosaur was still grinning, and even the vestal virgins were laughing their stupid heads off. Or at least, they would have been, if the dinosaur hadn't already decapitated the lot of them. Mr Qixotl took his revenge by switching off the psychoactive fibres, and the tapestry unravelled, becoming a pile of very grumpy string on the floor of the security centre.

All over the Unthinkable City, the surveillance devices were closing their eyes, the furnishings were collapsing into blobs of shapeless memory plastic, and the torches were snuffing themselves out, one by one. Qixotl deactivated the Brigadoon circuit, forcing the City to materialise under the evening sky of the East Indies ReVit Zone. The tourists could have one last gawp, he decided. Out of spite, he erased the neural programs of the leopards, letting them run free outside the City walls.

After all this time, after all this effort, the auction had come to nothing. Qixotl would have been livid, if he'd had any energy left. At the end of the day, having stuck out the threats and the assassination attempts, what did he have to show for it? Sod all.

No, it was even worse than that. He had pains in his chest, where the wound had been. And he had the Celestis hanging over him like a bad head cold. Yeah, he'd done the deal with Trask, he'd made sure he hadn't been marked, and at least he was still alive and kicking. But then, he hadn't told the Celestis the whole truth. He wondered if they'd have been so reasonable if they'd known what he'd been trying to pull off.

The Celestis, like most of the powers who'd attended the auction, thought the Doctor had died on Dronid. They thought the body had somehow been recovered from the wreckage of the big battle there, they thought Qixotl had managed to track it down before anyone else.

It wasn't that simple. It wasn't that simple at all. It was true, the body had been pulled out of the ruins on Dronid, but Mr Qixotl knew who'd put it there, and why. The pedigree of the corpse wasn't as cut and dried as everyone seemed to think, not by a long chalk.

Qixotl's fingers wriggled across the master console, decompiling the block transfer codes. Piece by piece, wall by wall, the City fell apart. As he worked, Qixotl began to wonder if he should go and hide out in some parallel universe or other for a while, until the heat died down. The true story of the Doctor's death was complicated, very complicated, and he doubted the Celestis would be happy if they found out the full extent of his involvement.

This, he thought, is one secret I'm going to have to keep. I mean, really. If anyone figures out the whole story, I'll never be safe again.

In Mictlan, on the top floor of a castle which might, to some eyes, have resembled a multi-storey car park, the Celestis kept an eye on the universe outside through the aperture at the centre of the Grand Hall. Specifically, they watched a certain rainforest on a certain water-rich planet in Mutters' Spiral, where a battered police box stood under a darkening sky, sheltered by bio-engineered banana trees.

The Celestis observed, without comment, as two humanoid figures stumbled into the box, a silver casket following them through the doors. Then there was a pause, of a good few minutes. In all that time, none of the Celestis said a word.

Finally, the box vanished, and the Celestis began to mutter among themselves. The Doctor, they rumbled, had left the Earth. None of the other powers attending the auction had tried to stop him. Their newest agent was safely away, ready for his first set of instructions.

With unusual good cheer, those among the Celestis who controlled the new agent – because there were many factions in Mictlan, of course, and not all of them had thought that getting involved with the Doctor was a good idea – widened the aperture, then reached out for the agent's mind. The mark acted as a conduit, and through the conduit, orders were given.

The Celestis told the agent what they wanted. There was another pause. Then the agent told

them that I'M TRAPPED WHERE AM I THE WALLS THE WALLS ARE WHITE EVERYTHING IS WHITE THERE'S SOMETHING IN HERE WITH ME NO OH NO IT'S ME IT'S ALL ME IT HURTS MAKE IT STOP I HAVE TO OBEY MY EMPLOYERS I HAVE TO OBEY THE CELESTIS WHO AM I WHO AM I WORKING FOR IT HURTS IT HURTS I HAVE TO OBEY YOU NO I DON'T HAVE TO OBEY YOU NOT YOU YOU'RE NOT THE ONES WHO GIVE ME MY ORDERS YES THEY ARE NO THEY'RE NOT IT HURTS SO MUCH HELP OH HELP THE WALLS THE WALLS ARE WHITE EVERYTHING IS WHITE WHERE AM I WHERE AM I WHERE AM I WHERE –

The Celestis closed the aperture.

There was a long silence, longer than any in recent memory, if the word "recent" meant anything in the land of the dead. At last, those who had nothing to do with the new agent started laughing.

It wasn't the Doctor. The Celestis didn't know who or what their new agent was, but it wasn't the Doctor, and it seemed to be marked already, by some other power. Through the aperture, they'd heard the sounds of a personality tearing itself in two, throwing itself against the walls of its prison.

There was only one conclusion the Celestis could draw. The Doctor had tricked them. Even for those who'd been laughing, the thought was alarming. Firstly, because it proved a mere corporeal life-form could outplay the Celestis, and secondly, because the Doctor had committed the worst sin imaginable.

He'd gone back on his word. He'd broken the rules. And for the Celestis, that was a crime which could not, and would not, be tolerated.

'You buried Laika,' Sarah had said. 'But who'll bury *you*?'

The Doctor trudged across the surface of Quiescia, the casket following in his wake. Wake; an apt word, he told himself, because that was exactly what this was. A one-man wake, a funeral with him as gravedigger, pallbearer, mourner, priest, and corpse. He could have asked Sam to help, but he knew she would have asked too many questions. Somehow, she'd managed to get through this whole affair without finding out whose body was in the box, and he didn't want to have to break the news to her now the worst of it was over.

She was asleep right now, back in the TARDIS. When she woke up, fully rested, she'd start querying the events of the past few hours. The Doctor decided he'd have to tell her the body was some alien super-weapon or other. Not a million miles from the truth.

It was a funny thing. These last few months, he'd come to think of himself as an honest life-form, not like his last regeneration at all. Now he was having to go through the old routine again, desperately covering up the cracks in his own history. He wasn't sure whether to feel ashamed or comforted.

He reached the top of the hill, the pale blue pebbles crunching and shifting under his shoes. Quiescia was exactly as it had been the day he'd come here with Sarah. Exactly. He doubted a single stone had been moved, until he'd stepped out of the TARDIS. The tombstone on the hilltop was smaller than he remembered, but the inscription was as it should have been. LAIKA. One word, no dates.

The Doctor had no idea how long it took him to reopen the grave. Time wasn't an issue here. That was why he'd chosen the place, after all. When his hands finally touched the surface of Laika's box, he started widening the hole, making it large enough for the second coffin. The casket floated behind him as he worked, patiently waiting for him to finish. He wondered if the "Relic" knew it was going to be laid to rest, at last.

When the grave was ready, he stepped back, and issued a mental command to the casket. He had no idea whether it understood him, or whether it acted on some instinct of its own, but it moved towards the hole without a second's hesitation. The voice inside the box was silent now, as it had been ever since the Doctor had left the ziggurat. Did the body know it was in safe hands, then? Or did it simply think its message would never be heard, at least not by the human ears it seemed to need?

The casket came to rest at the bottom of the pit, one coffin resting on top of the other. The Doctor reached into his pocket. The item he wanted came to hand immediately; it was the peacefulness of this place, he decided, it was easy to be at one with your pockets here. He weighed the

thermosystron bomb up in his palm. Pink letters danced across the face of the device, instructions and copyright notices in gaudy Selachian hieroglyphs. The Doctor primed the bomb with a few gentle strokes of his forefinger, then knelt down, and slipped it into the grave.

He stood by the hole for a few minutes more, his eyes closed, his lips moving. He couldn't think of a decent prayer, so he settled for a piece of prose he thought his future self would have approved of. He didn't bother marking the gravestone with another name.

The last thing he did on the hilltop was throw a handful of blue dirt down onto the top of the casket. The casket stopped glowing as soon as the soil hit it, though that could have been coincidence. Suddenly, it was dull, lifeless, just a box in the ground. Just a box, thought the Doctor. Nothing special.

He hadn't expected it to be like this. He'd thought about his funeral, more than once, and he'd always imagined his grave-side being surrounded by people. Old friends come to pay their last respects, old enemies come to gloat, only to find that there was something missing from their lives all of a sudden. But he hadn't expected this. No, nothing like this.

He didn't hurry on his way back to the TARDIS. There was no need to. He'd set the bomb quite carefully, he knew how much time he had before the blast.

As it happened, the device detonated when he was at the bottom of the hill, much sooner than he'd expected. Faulty timing mechanism; he'd been lucky not to get caught in the implosion. Still, he'd always been lucky. Behind him, there was the sound of collapsing space-time, as the bomb turned a ten-foot-wide area of the planet's surface into a small, and carefully contained, neutron star.

The Doctor imagined all the things that had ceased to be, up on the hilltop. The casket, the tombstone, the remains of a small Russian dog. And more, of course.

But he didn't turn around.

He stepped into the TARDIS, closed the doors behind him, and pressed the dematerialisation switch before he'd even bothered to lay in a new course. The ship slid away from the planet, leaving behind nothing but silence and a few loose pebbles.

Another hundred million nights passed on Quiescia. Nothing changed, and no one else came.



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